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GERTRUDE ATHERTON

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THE CRYSTAL CUP

BY MRS. ATHERTON

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The
CRYSTAL CUP

By

GERTRUDE ATHERTON

Into a crystal cup the dusky wine
I pour, and, musing at so rich a shrine,
I watch the star that haunts its ruddy gloom.
GEORGE STERLING

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PART I

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THE CRYSTAL CUP

CHAPTER I

"Old age will be served," said Mrs. Carteret grimly. "But I suppose you think I am a long time dying."

Gita made a face in the heavy shade of the bed-hangings, but replied politely: "I am glad to be here, grandmother, and when it's my turn to die I'll take all the time I choose."

She had a crisp clear voice and a staccato delivery, which she made no attempt to modify in the sick-room, and the old lady frowned.

"I never cared for your mother, but she had a soft low voice, 'an excellent thing in woman.' Why did you not model your own upon it? And you do all you can to distort and destroy the Carteret beauty in your attempt to look like a boy. The Carteret women were all dashing brunettes, but feminine. Otherwise they never would have had men crawling at their feet, generation after generation."

"If men crawled at my feet—which they don't do these days, anyhow—I'd kick them out of the way. And if I were a man myself—and I wish to God I were—I'd see women to the devil before I'd make a fool of myself——"

"I don't like your language. I don't like your voice. I don't like your bobbed hair——"

"My hair is not bobbed."

"Bad enough whatever it is. I don't like your 'brooding brows,' to quote an expression I read in a silly novel. I don't like your boyish defiant bearing; it is not ladylike. I don't like your ugly tailored suits—I've never seen you with a single feminine adornment——"

"You never will. Haven't I told you I hate—loathe—being a female?"

"Fiddlesticks. I don't pretend to know what bee you've got in your bonnet, but if you'll take my advice you'll pluck it out before it's too late——"

"It's not in my bonnet. It's inside my skull."

"Don't interrupt me. You've no manners. . . . But you're a Carteret all the same, in spite of your ridiculous airs and notions, and you look—could look—exactly as I did in my youth: I was your grandfather's second cousin and a Carteret to my finger-tips—except that you are not tall enough. I was five-feet-eight and you must be quite three inches shorter. I was the beauty and the belle of my day, and that is more than you will ever be unless you take heed before it is too late."

The gray old voice, with its sudden moments of vehement life, trailed off and her gaze turned inward. The light from the open window shone on her face high on the pillows in the ancient four-post bed, and Gita looked at it with the cold appraisement of youth. Beautiful? Once, perhaps. The black eyes were still keen and bright, although sunken deep in sockets as yellow and crinkled as an old Asiatic's. The bony ridge of the nose was high and thin, but the cheeks were seamed with a thousand little wrinkles and the mouth was a pale satiric line. She looked more like an old bird of prey than the remnants of a woman, and Gita decided it was not worth the mental effort to repad that face with firm young flesh and give it the pedestal of a swan-like neck

or any of the other absurdities of archaic youth. She looked longingly through the window at the sunlight, but she had made up her mind to "do the decent thing" as the old lady had rescued her from poverty and heaven knew what not. Besides, she admitted grudgingly, blood was blood, and her grandmother had no one else. Noblesse oblige. Moreover, she rather liked this new-found relative, with her sharp, sarcastic, if superannuated, mind. If she had been affectionate life would have been unendurable once more.

The old Carteret Manor was not far from the island covered by Atlantic City, and behind the Old Shore Road. It was surrounded on three sides by pine woods but open to the sea on the east. There had been a storm the night before and from this high window Gita could see the tossing spray that hid the horizon. She forgot her grandmother until the old lady spoke again.

"They named you Gita, anyhow!" she said triumphantly. "The first daughter of every son was always named Gita, but it would have been like your father to break the tradition, especially as your mother disliked me. . . . There have been many Gita Carterets! And you are a Carteret through and through. Not a trace of your mother, thank heaven——"

"I won't hear a word against my mother! My mother was an angel and a martyr, and as for my father—I don't care if he was your son——"

"He was a scallywag. I'll not deny it. Many of the Carteret men were. My sympathies were with your mother although I liked her as little as she liked me. She was no wife for Gerald—I told her so—but for that matter only a Carteret could handle a Carteret. Nevertheless, young lady, it behooves a child to speak of its parents with respect."

Miss Carteret gave an unladylike snort.

"Oh, yes! And there is one thing you have *not* inherited, and that is the Carteret grand manner. Even your father had that, and when he was most intoxicated. You have neither manner nor manners."

"Both are out of date."

"Are they? I am not so sure. The world is not entirely composed of what you call the younger generation. Are you a specimen of the flappers all these magazines and novels are full of?"

"I am not. Silly little *females*. Besides, I'm twenty-two."

"I can't make out whether you seem to hate men or women more, and you won't give any reason."

"I don't hate women. I only resent being one. If you had been my old grandfather I'd have starved in the streets before I'd have come here."

"It is a wonder, with your remarkable freedom of speech, you don't say you would have gone on the streets."

"Oh, never! I'd have died a thousand deaths first. Not," she added hurriedly, "because I'd have been too good for it, but because—well, I'd have killed the first man that touched me."

"Of course you are virtuous," said the old lady complacently. "All the Carteret women have been. Flirts and coquettes, perhaps——"

"Virtuous nothing. I don't care a damn——"

"You are not a boy, after all, so kindly refrain from swearing in my presence. The Carteret men swore like troopers, but their women never forgot themselves. And please remember that I am helpless. I cannot rise and leave the room."

"Sorry, grandmother. I'll not do it again."

"You have a good heart, anyhow—— No, you needn't snort. It's a hideous noise, and a good heart is no disgrace in even a modern young woman. I like you in spite of everything, and I wish I could have had the bringing-up of you."

"I wish to God you had!" the girl exclaimed with unexpected passion. "I wish my mother could have died when I was born, or at least too young to remember anything, and that my father had brought me to you and then blown out his cruel brains."

"Well, I do not. There are some words I dislike exceedingly and 'suicide' is one of them. And I despise cowards." ("Old cliché," muttered Gita.) "That is another thing in you that pleases me. You have a high courage. All the Carterets had that."

"One more reason for being a Carteret!"

"You are an impertinent minx. . . . But I thought your parents were happy for a few years? I was given to understand that, although I never saw your mother again and Gerald only came home twice."

"Before my time, then. I can remember back to the age of four, and one of my first recollections is his knocking my mother about."

"What an expression! I suppose you mean he struck her. It is bad enough, heaven knows, however you express it. Gerald! I never thought he would so far forget himself, for a gentleman is never more of a gentleman than when he is in his cups. But he always had an ungovernable—yes, a vicious temper. But what a handsome dog he was! I was so proud of him. He was the youngest of ten and I am afraid I spoiled him. Is that the secret of your hatred of men?"

"Among others."

"Well, I should hope you had a better reason than that.

You should have too much common sense to judge all men by one. What are your other reasons?" she asked curiously. "I don't understand you at all. Too many years between us, I suppose. I don't understand any of the modern young women, and you appear to be the most singular of them all. Not that I have met many, bed-ridden as I am, but I have read some of the modern novels and they horrify me. You have certain points of difference, and I am thankful for that much. No doubt it is because you are a Carteret. You are not a fool at all events. Do you smoke cigarettes?"

"I do."

"Well, don't you ever dare bring one in here, or smell of one. Do you drink cocktails?"

"No. 'Fraid of bootlegger stuff."

"I don't mind you drinking a glass of wine with your dinner. There is some old Burgundy and port in the cellar, and, no doubt, a case or two of champagne. Tell Topper to bring up anything you like—but only one glass at a meal, though; and as the champagne is in quart bottles——"

"Thanks, grandmother, but I really don't care about it. It's time for your medicine."

She came out into the light, and Mrs. Carteret looked at her with a frown. "You *could* be a beauty," she said plaintively. "Why won't you, my dear? And at least don't stick your hands in your pockets again when you are in my presence—like a whistling schoolboy."

"Well, I can't just now." Gita's somber face broke into a smile that revealed even white teeth brilliantly enameled, and for the moment she looked feminine and roguish in spite of her cropped head and rigid spine. "Let me lift you a little higher. You nearly choked last time."

She thrust her arm under the pillow and held the glass to the old lady's sunken lips, then lowered her gently and returned to her chair in the shade of the curtains.

Mrs. Carteret sighed. "You have your good points, Gita, and I do wish you could have come to me before, although a sick-room is no place for a young girl. Eighty-two! It is a great age. Too old for a woman to live to by thirty—forty years. Your generation won't live as long."

"I should hope not. But I wish you wouldn't die." For the first time the hard boyish voice quivered. "I haven't anyone else. Why don't you try this rejuvenation thing?"

"Not I. Thirty years ago, perhaps, if they hadn't been so long discovering it. But I've had enough of life. Eighty-two! All the friends of my youth, all my children, dead. Nobody left but you, and I do not love you. You came to me too late and you are too different, if you are a Carteret. But it is kind of you to say that, my dear, and I am glad I can leave you independent, if not wealthy. You will have the old place and about eight thousand a year, although it may be less, what with the inheritance tax and all." A look of sharp anxiety came into her eyes. "You won't sell the manor, Gita? I could not rest in my grave."

"I shouldn't think of selling it. Sometimes I think I'd like to live here alone for the rest of my life."

"Nonsense. But it doesn't take much to keep it up, aside from the taxes. The grounds went to ruin long ago, and the greater part of the house has been closed since taxes and prices began to go up and my income down. . . . Carteret Manor was a great domain in the seventeenth century, and even in your great-grandfather's time, but we were always an extravagant and improvident

race. There's nothing left of the old manor now but forty acres. Most of that is in woodland, although there are two farms, rented to decent folk. The rest of my small fortune is in securities, and there is a house in Atlantic City. Mr. Donald will be over from Philadelphia again in a day or two and I'll tell him to have a talk with you. If I thought I could live a year longer I'd transfer everything to you, but there is some sort of law——"

"That would be rather a reckless thing to do!" For a moment Gita's brilliant black eyes softened as she leaned forward. "I might sell out and skip, having first run you into the poorhouse."

"You may have bad manners and worse language, but I've lived too long to make any mistake about character——"

"And of course I'm a Carteret," said Gita mischievously.

"Of course. But it's not worth talking about. I'll not live a month, much less a year. . . . There's something else. I've wanted to speak of it ever since you came, but this is the first time I've had my way with that nurse and the opportunity for something like a real talk with you. Moreover—I suppose you'll spit fire."

"Fire away. Don't mind me."

"Well, it's this. I don't like the old name to die out. None of my sons married except your father and William, who died without issue. The other two died young, one out yonder in the Thoroughfare, when he was fourteen. Three of the girls died in childhood during a diphtheria epidemic—my own Gita among them! Violet and Rose withered away in this house, unmarried; they were plain, and I would not countenance such suitors as they attracted. In the few plain Carteret women the Carteret spirit seemed also to be lacking. Evelyn had her full measure. She cut a great swath in New York, where my

sister gave her a season, and then married to suit herself. But she died childless—long since. Now, you and I are the only Carterets left and unless you do as I ask the old name will be forgotten—like many another old name only to be found in some history of New Jersey."

"Well?" Gita's crisp voice rose a key.

"I should die content if you would promise me to ask —yes, insist, that your husband take our name——"

"I'll never marry! Never! Never!" Now Gita's voice was harsh and defiant.

"Fiddlesticks. All girls say that. I said it myself—and did not marry until I was twenty-seven. I was too fond of being a belle—I had more scalps at my belt than any girl of my time." Again her gaze turned inward. "My father was one of the founders of Atlantic City—one of that group of far-sighted men that all Philadelphia laughed at—and put more than a penny in the old United States Hotel. Ah, what gay times we had! That old hotel was the scene of my triumphs, season after season. People of quality went to resorts in those days. Now they avoid them as they would the plague, if one may judge from the hordes on the Boardwalk. I used to be wheeled up and down in one of those chairs before I was bed-ridden . . . Nothing but tourists——"

"Well, why not?" demanded Gita, who was growing restless. "It is a public walk and even tourists want to enjoy themselves, I suppose."

Mrs. Carteret, recalled, drew her scant brows together. "I am not talking of rights," she said coldly. "I merely regret a time when the beach and even the Boardwalk was a promenade of fashion, of beautiful well-dressed women and handsome men. They were better to look at, and I happen to dislike common and undistinguished

people. I hope you do not think yourself 'democratic,' among other things?"

"Certainly I do. About the only decent treatment I've ever had has been from 'common' people—until we went to California, at all events. It was gentlemen, men of my father's class, that made my mother's life unendurable. And we hardly set up to be aristocrats on five cents a year."

"Your mother should have written me she was in such dire straits. I knew that your father was living extravagantly in Europe but I never suspected he was spending his capital. He told me on both his visits that he was temporarily hard up. The first time I lent him a large sum of money. The second time I refused, under the advice of Mr. Donald's father, and reproached him with extravagance. He flew into a terrible temper, flung himself out of the house, and never even wrote to me again. Well, he died soon after. . . . But I would never have permitted his wife and child to suffer."

"My mother would have starved before she would have taken a cent from a Carteret."

"She should not have permitted her child to starve. . . . However—there is one question I should like to ask before we go further—and I have other things to say. I wish you would move your chair into the light. I can hardly see you."

Gita moved her chair obediently although with an impatient jerk.

Mrs. Carteret regarded her grandchild with a penetrating sharp gaze.

"Answer me this question, truthfully, and without quibbling. Have you actually no pride of race?"

"I think such things ridiculous."

"You do? And would you—honestly, mind you—

rather be a Jenks or a Hobbs than a Carteret? With no generations of breeding and education behind you? Just a common young woman with rudely modeled features and a blowsy prettiness, without an atom of distinction? Answer me that."

Gita moved uneasily. "It is good enough as a background, I suppose. But I'm no snob."

"No Carteret was ever a snob. But they were aristocrats. Vulgar people do not know the difference, and you are not vulgar, absurd as you are. There are worse things in life than poverty, and you may thank your stars you have escaped a few of them, owing to your despised Carteret ancestry. You begin where they left off, instead of struggling from the gutter upward. You realize that, I hope?"

"Yes, I realize it, grandmother. As you say, there are a few things I don't have to overcome. I know the proper use of forks and I dislike a common voice and bad table manners. Being a Carteret, so far, hasn't been of much use to me, but I am quite willing to make use of what little it may do for me in the future. Does that satisfy you?"

"Not at all. But I trust to time to bring you to your senses."

"What next?"

"I was about to say, when my mind wandered to the past—as an old woman's will—that my intention never to marry died a natural death when your grandfather came back from Europe, where he had been in the diplomatic service for years. I married him six weeks later. You have had an unfortunate experience which has given you all sorts of distorted views and ideas, but you will get over them in time. Wait until the right man comes along."

Gita writhed as much at the old-fashioned idiom as at the idea involved. She set her lips in a straight line.

"I shall never marry. Might as well make up your mind to it, grandmother."

The old lady sighed heavily, although her eyes flashed with temper. "Well! I shan't live long enough to see you come to your senses; but just mark my words: you are a woman, a female, as you choose to call it, much as you may resent the fact; and trying to look like a boy does not make you one. You may hold yourself like a ramrod, but you have a graceful body if it is as thin as a plank, and the fine points of the Carterets. You have a lovely round throat and your eyelashes would make any boy ridiculous. Oh, yes, you are a girl, my dear, you are a girl. Don't grind your teeth. It's bad for the enamel. Now run out and take a walk. It's time for my nap—and I hear the starched petticoats of that nurse."

CHAPTER II

GITA stood with her hands in the pockets of her sport skirt surveying the old manor house from the drive. It was built of oblong blocks of stone obviously cemented together in the fashion of so many Northern Colonial mansions: a great square box of a house, surmounted by a gabled roof; without architectural grace but solid and imposing, and immune to the elements and time. The gardener was as old as her grandmother and the lawns were thin, the rose-bushes and other flowering plants looked as senile as himself. But the pine woods on three sides were beautiful and dim and old, and Gita was conscious of a thrill of pride in her inheritance. She frowned, then shrugged her shoulders philosophically.

"Why not? It's all I've got. And perhaps a background is something to lean against, anyhow." She would not admit that she had felt curiously at home from the hour of her arrival.

She sauntered out of the park and across the bridge of the Thoroughfare, a narrow body of salt water dividing the mainland from the most famous of its islands. Atlantic City amused her, but she did not turn toward the town. Some distance to the south, below the hotels, the Boardwalk had been demolished during a storm uncommonly heavy for even that wild part of the Atlantic coast; with its record, during the days of sailing vessels, of thousands of wrecks and bodies washed ashore, of evil men and false lights and ghouls crouching in wait.

Since the disaster to this end of the promenade it was

deserted by idle saunterers. Walking briskly, sometimes running, with elbows pressed close to her sides, Gita made directly for this solitary spot and sat down on the sands, embracing her knees and staring out at the tossing ocean. Gradually her hard spine drooped forlornly, and although she scorned tears and self-pity, her mouth relaxed into the soft and charming curves of her youth. She felt small and desolate and alone. What was a dilapidated old manor to a girl who had been deprived of a far more significant birthright? If she could have grown up in that old place, a Carteret of the Carterets, she would have been a normal innocent girl, full of hope and day-dreams and every kind of delightful nonsense. At twenty-two she had not an illusion, and a horror and hatred of life. And her mother, the one person she had ever been able to care for, the one person who had it in her power to make her feel young and human and necessary, was dead.

More than once she had taken herself to task, scowled ferociously at her distorted ego. Common sense dictated that she should ignore her unfortunate experience of life as too uncommon to warp any educated woman's viewpoint, readjust, reorient, herself. Other girls had had unfortunate experiences—but not hers. Not hers.

Her earliest memory was of Paris . . . an old detached house in Passy . . . a constant uproar downstairs that kept her awake in the nursery under the roof . . . ribald laughter and singing, brawls, banging doors all over the house. . . . Sometimes she would hang over the banisters in her nightgown, shivering with cold, fretful but curious. . . . Her mother with white desperate face, running up the stairs, snatching the child, darting into the nearest room, locking the door . . . a man running after her . . . mumbling at the keyhole, cursing. . . . Gerald Carteret,

later, pounding on the door, commanding her to return to his guests and not make a silly little fool of herself. . . . Her mother's terrified sobbing, then quailing obedience lest he keep his threat and break down the door.

And moving, always moving. As Gita grew older she learned that her father and his guests not only drank and caroused but gambled, sometimes all day as all night . . . that his friends persecuted her mother, whom they called the Blonde Madonna. She received little protection from her husband, with whom, nevertheless, she was at that time infatuated; she hated him later. Gita begged her mother to leave him and return to San Francisco, but this seemed a poor alternative to the tormented Millicent. Her parents were dead, her only relative was an aunt, whom she disliked. She had no desire to return to a city, where, in her first season, and to the envy of the other girls, she had captured the handsome and dashing Easterner, visiting polo friends in Burlingame. Now they thought of her as living brilliantly in Europe, although it must have struck them as odd sometimes that they never were able to communicate with her in their many trips abroad.

Moreover, a wife's duty was to her husband, no matter what he might be. Even at the age of ten Gita sniffed. But her lovely mother was the one perfect being in a too imperfect world, and if she said it was right to live with a man who was intoxicated most of the time, hit her, subjected her to every form of insult, then right it must be. But she conceived a strong distaste for husbands and abominated her father, informing him more than once she wished he were dead. He would scowl or grin down at the small child, straight and defiant, and smack her or toss her to the ceiling, according to his mood.

Carteret was an unlucky gambler, on the whole, and lived "on the interest of his debts," after his own and his wife's inheritances had expired. When his creditors became too pressing he bundled his family out in the night and set up in another capital. When fortune ran with him he was charming and generous; when luck jibed he struck his wife, his child, his servants, whoever got in his raging way, raved like a madman, then collapsed in drunken tears at his Madonna's feet and implored her forgiveness. . . .

Gita hated him increasingly, hated the other men, with their well-bred dissipated faces, who persecuted her mother . . . in time herself. . . . Herself! These were the ugliest and most indelible memories of all. . . .

This life, in which the war made no appreciable difference, ended abruptly when Gita was sixteen. Gerald Carteret died of typhoid fever in a French provincial town where he was hiding from his creditors. Gita sold her grandmother Sears' engagement-ring, the only remaining jewel, and buried him thankfully; then sat for three months at her mother's bedside in the charity ward of a hospital, exercising her will frantically to keep life in her mother's exhausted body; a poor family in the neighborhood keeping life in her own.

Mrs. Carteret recovered and the two faced starvation. Then for her child's sake Millicent wrote to her aunt, and received much scornful criticism in return, more sound advice, and a promise of a hundred dollars a month.

After that life was a succession of cheap pensions, with poor food, dingy company, and always some idle husband who made love to the indestructibly charming Millicent; to the expressed indignation of his wife. Constant peregrinations interfered with Gita's schooling but she received an education of sorts. She was quick at

languages and had ample opportunity to pick them up. As men ogled her on the street as well as in the pensions she abandoned the graceful languid carriage that had been a part of her anxious training, throwing back her shoulders and striding along like a stiff young soldier on parade; finally, to her mother's wailing accompaniment, cut off her abundant black hair.

"I should have been a boy anyhow," she told the superlatively feminine Millicent. "It was a horrid mistake of Nature. Then I not only could have taken you out of this rotten poverty-stricken life one day, and given you lovely gowns and delicate food, but I could have stood up to these awful men that annoy you."

When she was seventeen the old aunt died and left her small fortune and the house built by the first Sears to adventure in California, to "my only remaining relative and not unloved niece, Millicent Sears Carteret." The heiress decided to leave Europe, which she frankly hoped never to see again, and take her child to San Francisco. It was far from Carteret Manor, pride had gone the way of vanity, and she longed for her old friends; moreover, Gita could finish her education and have proper associates for the first time.

In San Francisco Gita was almost happy for two years. She enjoyed her school, the cool electric climate, the magnificent views, the drifting fogs, the long walks over the hills, and the Chinese cook's admirable confections. Millicent's friends were as faithful as she had anticipated, and Gita drifted into a semi-intimacy with girls who filled her at first with wonder and then with emulation. They were very modern young people, with the wisdom of the serpent, a fixed intent to do as they pleased, and a canny ability to take care of themselves. Gita, with her extensive and barely interrupted knowledge of the nocuous

side of life and the hideous lust of men, at times felt old enough to be their grandmother, at others like the little sister of these amused and cynical maidens. Her mother had inculcated obedience, to one's maternal parent, at least, as the first law of nature, and the only time Gita had ever defied her was when she had done her best to transform herself into a boy. She had been as severely chaperoned as was possible and admonished against all things unladylike, particularly cigarettes. It had been unnecessary to warn her against too free a manner with men as she hated all men, and never danced as she would have preferred to be embraced by a snake; but the consequence was that she had not the most elementary knowledge of flirtation.

Flirtation, however, she was informed by her new friends, was out of date. Past was the day of subtle methods, of practiced coquetry, of recourse to every feminine device to win and keep a man, while he, poor dupe, played the hollow rôle of hunter. The girls called the "boys" up on the telephone as often as the boys called them, and even took them out to restaurants and paid the bill. This was the day of fifty-fifty, of equality of the sexes. Gita looked in vain for romance, still in a measure the mainspring of fiction. But these girls laughed at the word, in spite of the movies, where, in the intervals between parties, they took their followers of an evening; conversation, apparently, was among the lost arts. One young married woman told Gita casually that her husband, after a more or less desultory wooing, suggested they "hitch up," and she had accepted him, not because she liked him better than several others, but because his type pleased her, she was in the mood to marry, and wanted a baby. By this time Gita had ceased to blush at a frankness which would have horrified her mother,

and at one time herself, accustomed to the finesse of Europeans (when sober); and, with the plasticity of youth, superimposed something of a new self upon what she had believed to be a finished and permanent structure.

But although, after she finished school, she went out to dinners, she refused to go to parties, since that would have meant dancing, and she recoiled from contact with even these innocuous young men. Not, as she was aware, that she would have been importuned for dances, for the boys had "no use for her," she was a "highbrow," wasn't a "regular girl," "ought to have been a boy and tried to look like one." The girls, with whom she was popular, tried to give her "points," but desisted when they understood that her dislike of men was sincere, although they did not guess the cause. If she could have brought herself to tell the story of both her surface and her psychic life to these wise maidens, no doubt they would have blown the chaff from the wheat with their laughing common sense, told her to "forget it," remember that youth was the only thing that mattered, and, when she had had a good time for a year or two, marry and have a baby. But Gita would rather have gone out into the breakers at the Cliff House and drowned herself than to have revealed the festering sores in her soul to anyone. And no less than three noxious experiences with married men, fascinated by her vivid youth and intolerance of their sex, extinguished any possibility she may have unconsciously cherished of forgetting the past.

Upon one occasion only did she appear to attract a "boy." He had made an average record in the war, was the son of a rich man, and although he "played about" with the girls he "fell for" none of them. The other young men disliked and criticized him, but the girls retorted

that he was too good a dancer and mah-jongg player to lose. One night he met Gita at a dinner, and more than once she saw him watching her with covert speculation. Later, with considerable finesse for a San Francisco youth, he lured her into the conservatory, and after telling her admiringly that she looked the real thing and made chromos of the other dear little daisies, seized her in his arms and tried to kiss her. He received an abraded shin, a scratch across his cheek, and a loosened front tooth, which sent him cursing out of her presence to find an exit at the back of the house. They met some weeks later and he said airily: "My mistake. Sorry. Hope you'll forget it." But she knew that he hated her and looked exultingly at the gold band across his front teeth.

The girls discussed her psychoanalytically and decided she had a complex, induced no doubt by resentment that she had not been born a boy. On the other hand she had not "rushed" any of them and was anything but masculine, in spite of her funny little swagger and lack of feminine adornment. Ann Melrose came nearer the truth. "She is so precocious on one side of her that she may have had a desperate love-affair at the age of sixteen, and the man turned out a rotter. Did something that horrified her. But if she doesn't mend her ways she'll never give any other man the chance to administer the right kind of shock. She's about as approachable as a hedgehog and as adaptable as a wire fence. 'Fraid she's got too much brains and not enough common sense. Something gave her a bad twist. That's good enough for me. I'm sick of psycho. Too bad! She's a game kid and as straight as they come. Wonder how she'll turn out."

When Gita was nineteen misfortune once more fell

upon them. The trustee of the small estate, failing in his wooing of Millicent, absconded with all but the house, which was mortgaged. Life was gray once more. They took in lodgers, dismissed the cook, and did their own work. Gita saw less of her friends, although they ran in every few days and occasionally made the beds. Millicent's friends sent her hampers from the country and carried her off now and then for a day in San Mateo, Menlo Park, Burlingame, or San Rafael. One of her old beaux proposed for the fifth time since her arrival, but Millicent had had her fill of marriage. Moreover, she knew that if she married again she would lose her daughter; of whom, although she was a rather silly woman, she had a considerable understanding.

The enterprise was not a success. The lodgers either made love to their pretty landlady or did not pay their rent and had to be evicted. Finally Gita turned them all out and took in only women; to find that some were respectable and others not. Recommendations were easily forged. After a scandal Millicent sold the house for a little more than the mortgage and accepted the position of housekeeper to one of her friends in San Mateo, while Gita taught French and Italian to a class of youngsters hastily assembled. Neither would accept invitations for "long visits until something turns up."

Gita saw her friends constantly once more although she refused to go to dinners or luncheons. Her clothes barely held together, and they dared not offer her presents. But she learned to ride, to play tennis, to swim (in pools), and her naturally robust health, which had been impaired by too much confinement and hard indoor work, was restored.

By this time Millicent's spirit was broken and her

strength had been failing for some time. Gita took her to a sanitarium for the tubercular on the California desert, paying the expenses with the few hundreds left from the sale of the house. On her death-bed Millicent wrote to Mrs. Carteret.

CHAPTER III

THE tide was coming in. Gita realized that she was cold and rather tired. She ran along the beach to quicken her blood, then took a trolley to the mainland. As she walked up the avenue of the manor she saw a motor standing before the door of the house and hoped she would be able to slip upstairs to her room unseen. The elderly and middle-aged daughters of her grandmother's contemporaries did not interest her and she was inclined to pay little heed to the old lady's adhortations to lose no time making friends in her new life. She had been at the manor a month and not met anyone of her own age. Few of any other. She saw her grandmother in brief interviews only, for the nurse maintained that this alien relative excited the invalid.

As she was stepping carefully over the old rugs of the hall she sniffed a familiar aroma, and then observed that the door of the drawing-room was open, and that a blind had evidently been raised. She had entered this room only once, on the day after her arrival, when curiosity had led her to explore the cradle of her ancestors. She had felt no inclination to visit it again. It was immense and dark and dreary, paneled with mahogany to the ceiling and crowded with ill-assorted furniture representing every period from 1660 to 1880. She assumed that her grandmother's funeral would be held in its musty grandeur and after that it would be less inviting than ever.

She heard a light movement. For whom could the

drawing-room have been opened today? Mrs. Carteret's friends were escorted directly upstairs by Topper. Curiosity overcame her and she tiptoed to the door and looked through the crack. Then her heart gave a leap. A girl was standing in the middle of the room wrinkling her nose. Gita forgot that she hated everybody and remembered the unfailing kindness of her friends in California. She had not loved any of them and was too self-centered for intimacies, but they had given her what little tolerance of life she had ever known.

This girl looked rather jolly. She wore a very smart tailored suit that gave her the proper geometrical outline, and the prevailing hat of a shape once identified only with sport. Her face looked out triumphantly from its austere setting, for it was a really beautiful face, with its flower-like eyes and regular features. The bright fair hair was shingled and a cigarette projected from a mouth like pink coral. There was a touch of orange in the costume and Gita noted vagrantly that it clashed with the lips.

Gita hoped she was not married. It was as impossible to tell a young married woman from a girl as a smart déclassée from a woman of fashion, and Gita was not interested in babies and housekeeping. But a girl!

However, there was but one way to find out.

She entered the cold drawing-room and held out her hand with a smile.

"I am Gita Carteret," she said. "I hope you have come to see me."

The other girl removed her cigarette and shook hands heartily.

"Have I? Rather. I'm Polly Pleyden, and as you've rescued me from melancholia I'm that much more glad

to see you. Was just thinking of laying myself out to see what it would feel like."

Gita's eyes sparkled with appreciation. "Isn't it—just? And we can't talk in a mausoleum. Come up to my room."

"Good! I've been walking about to keep myself from freezing to death. Topping old house, though. Not many of them left. Most of the old houses about here were built of wood and have vanished long since. Luckily for me the rats monopolized our old barn before I was born and granny moved out to Chelsea. Not much tradition there but plenty of light and modern furniture. Glory! Do you sleep in that?"

They had entered Gita's bedroom. Large as it was a four-poster seemed to take up fully a third of it, and highboys, chests, an immense wardrobe, heavy chairs and sofas, covered with horsehair, left little space for movement. The windows looked out into the wood. Gita had jerked off the bed-hangings on the night of her arrival.

"Well," pursued the irreverent Miss Pleyden, "if you ever get hard up you can sell this old junk. There are imbeciles that will pay any price for mahogany and black old oak. I'd pass out if I had to sleep in this room."

"I only do sleep in it! Take this chair. I've tried them all and it's not quite as hard as the others. Have one of mine?"

"Thanks. I prefer Happy Stars. Debased taste. One of the fell results of the war. Jolly old war. Did *us* a good turn."

Both girls smoked in silence for a moment, secretly appraising each other. Miss Pleyden wriggled until she made herself comfortable and Gita seated herself on the one unbroken spring of a sofa.

"Going to stay with us long?" asked Polly. "I hope so. I must give you a party and have you meet our crowd. We do our little best to amuse ourselves."

"You look as if you amused yourself," said Gita, smiling. "But I can't go anywhere at present. My grandmother won't live much longer, I'm afraid, and I must remain on tap."

"I should hope not! Over eighty, isn't she? Well, you'll molder if you have to live here much longer. Mother says she's leaving everything to you, and I hope you'll sell this old tomb and buy something over in Chelsea—no, I take that back. Even I'd keep this house if I had it. All it needs is new furniture and not so much woods." She took off her hat and threw it on the floor. Gita, now that this fashionable extinguisher was removed, saw how completely beautiful she was. Such locks as had been spared by the shears curled naturally about her face. She had a charming little head alertly poised; her forehead was low and full, her delicate nose a straight line, her curved mouth soft and pink, with happy corners. She looked sweet and innocent and utterly charming and as cool and pure as an arum lily; but Gita was wary of judging by Nature's irrelevancies. And she had heard her San Francisco friends discuss these Eastern girls. "Hard-boiled, my dear, doesn't express it. They'd turn nails green. We're little ba-bas beside 'em."

"Surely you go out occasionally?" asked Miss Pleyden anxiously.

"Oh, yes, I go for a long walk every day. The salt marshes fascinate me, and I never saw anything like the Boardwalk. It is rather amusing."

"Amusing is the word for it until you're tired of looking at people you never see anywhere else. Ever see the Digue at Ostend?"

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"Oh . . . yes!" But Gita scowled. She had particularly unpleasant memories of Ostend. Her father had gambled away his last sou in the Kursaal, and been obliged to sneak out in the night as he could not meet his I.O.U's. And one of his friends! Gentlemen! Carterets!

"Well, don't look so tragic about it—I'm going to call you Gita and you must call me Polly—at once. Time was, I'm told, when we Atlantans were cold and formal, but that's ancient history. Our poor parents try to keep it up, but they've given *us* up. And then you are one of us," she added, sincerely casual. "Are you engaged?"

"No!"

"That's right. Plenty of time. We don't have to marry these days for the sake of freedom, and life's one long dream when you haven't a responsibility and can do as you please. Thank heaven I was born twenty years ago, not forty. Moreover, I'm waiting until the men get over prohibition and stop acting like naughty boys. I hate the sight of a hip-pocket. Some of the girls drink because they think it's funny or think the men think they like it. But I'm afraid I'd go blind or something or come out in a rash. Believe in keeping one's head, too."

"Rather! Life's hard enough without looking round for ways to make it harder."

"Oh, come now, life's a jolly nice proposition. I've heard you've had a lot of trouble and I'm damn sorry. Trouble never was meant for youth. We'll change all that when—ah—you're free. No use blinking facts. Old people have to die and not such a bad idea at that. My granny was a real affliction. We had to kiss her twice a day and she wouldn't wear her false teeth. I was always afraid I'd fall in. What's your type?"

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"Type?"

"Men."

"Oh!" Gita's black brows met. "I don't like any type."

"Wow! Wow! That'll never do. I haven't the least respect for men, but life would be a desert without them. When I've exhausted the girl racket and am ready to satisfy my curiosity about those things our parents never mention before us, I'll pick out a New Yorker—father's one, thank heaven, and we spend our winters there—with a few millions, dark good looks, and a pastmastership in the art of love-making. About thirty, say. It takes an American that long to acquire any sort of technique. Then when that phase has run its course, he'll know enough to let me go my own way. I certainly shall let him go his. Meanwhile a boy and a girl, blonde and brunette. That's the perfect life."

Gita laughed for the first time since she had left San Mateo for the desert. "Wonderful if life were as simple as that! Why are you so sure you are going to have your own way in everything?"

"If you know what you want and go for it you get it." Miss Pleyden had a crisp metallic voice, which, Gita inferred, expressed her ego more veritably than her lovely shell.

"That may be," said Gita. "All things being equal. Life has always dandled you on her lap and fondled your golden curls. But when she kicks instead of kisses and you have to fight her every inch of the way, you don't get what you want, not by a damn sight."

Polly Pleyden gave her a long stare. "Now, that is the last thing I should have expected you to say," she remarked. "You look high-spirited and courageous. You don't mean to tell me you've given up——"

"No!" Gita spat out the word. "I'll fight till I die. But I've no illusions. I'm not one of life's pets."

"Look here, Gita Carteret, I'm not going to pretend I don't know a lot of what you've been through. All your grandmother's friends, including my mother, have talked of nothing else since you got here. Uncle Bill spent half his time in Paris before the war, and we corkscrewed the whole rotten story out of him. Mrs. Gaunt, mother's crony, ran across your mother once, some time after your father's death. Met her in some provincial town or other and carried her off to lunch—she had met your mother when she was visiting here, just after she had married, and admired her immensely; said she was the loveliest thing she ever looked at, and far too good for Gerald Carteret, who seems to have been the last word. Well, she got a few things out of your mother, who was too glad to talk to a woman of her own sort once more to keep up her natural attempt at reserve. It wasn't difficult to find out she was poor and living in horrid pensions on a pittance from some relative. But she made Mrs. Gaunt vow she'd never tell Mrs. Carteret, and she never did. You've had a rotten life and I don't wonder you're bitter. But—how old are you?"

"Twenty-two." Gita, angry at first, had softened at the tribute to her mother.

"Well—that's old in one sense, these days. Jane Bull had had three affairs, married and settled down to a baby before she was twenty-three. But on the other hand it's only a bit over three and one-tenth of the allotted span—less if this rejuvenation thing pans out. Between our new way of looking at life, and science, we can be young about thirty years longer than any generation that's preceded us. What's more, your troubles of one sort, at

least, are over. You'll have an independent income when the old lady shuffles off. For all you know life may have done her worst by you at the start and have relented for keeps. Don't go on making faces at her. That old saying about man's being his own worst enemy isn't such a cliché as most. First thing you know you'll be down and out again. Come now. You're young enough to put all you've been through out of your mind and begin over. And you've ripping looks, if you don't mind just one personal remark!"

"You are very kind," said Gita, almost humbly. "But I don't think it is possible to forget—the impressions of one's plastic years are indelible. It is easier, I fancy, to forget at forty than at twenty."

"I believe the will can do anything—in spite of Coué. Fancy that's what's the matter with you! Too much imagination, plus habit."

"Perhaps. But I assure you I have no intention of brooding too much and making matters worse than they are. Now that I have the chance of ruling my own life—as far as anyone may—I intend to get *something* out of it. But men will play no part in it. Although I'll be glad to talk to any intelligent ones I may meet. I haven't met many so far."

"I think I can guess the reason for your hatred of men," said Miss Pleyden, who appeared to be disconcertingly shrewd. "But that will wear off, now that you are in a position where they no longer can take advantage of you. As I told you, I haven't any respect for the lot I run with, but there must be men somewhere that have glamour enough to make a girl feel she's head over. And what you want is a thumping love-affair."

"That sounds almost romantic." The subject was distasteful, but Gita was forced to smile.

"Not romantic. Merely undiluted nature. Fancy we all get it sooner or later, although nothing's worrying me less at present. But what I haven't seen I could inscribe on my thumb-nail. You're built for it. Just you refurnish this old barrack and leave the rest to me."

"Oh, I'll refurnish it if there's money enough—air it, anyway. But I'll stay here for a time and read——"

"For God's sake don't tell me you're intellectual!"

"Far from it. Been too busy. But there are many things I ought to read."

"Don't you dare queer my little game! Or if you will read tomey books keep it dark. It's what you don't know that gets you there. Life's the Book, anyhow, when you're young. . . . There's no hope this summer, but you'll visit me in New York next winter if I have to kidnap you. I haven't been so interested in anyone before in all my young life. Wish I'd called before, but mother said you were inhuman and I kept putting it off. So did the other girls, but they'll be along soon now. I'm Columbus, however, and shan't let them forget it. That means I must go—mother's been calling on Mrs. Carteret —but I'll be over again in a day or two."

A motor-horn had sounded discreetly. Miss Pleyden caught her hat on the point of her swagger-stick, tossed it to the other hand, settled it carefully on her head, opened her vanity-case and applied her lip-stick. Then she sprang to her feet and laid her hand on Gita's shoulder. "You're all right," she said emphatically. "I had an idea you weren't—— Well, never mind what I mean," as Gita jerked up her head. "In some things, I fancy, you're as green as mint. Dear old Dr. Freud would say you were heading straight for the rocks, but

there's a thing or two he didn't know when he set to work on the sub. Fancy you've been saved by a sound endocrine constitution. You see I know a thing or two myself, even if I never let on, owing to a perfect policy. There's another toot. We'll have to go down."

CHAPTER IV

GITA felt inclined to dance as she swaggered about the dilapidated old garden, her hands in her pockets. She felt uncommonly buoyant. Whether she liked Polly Pleyden or not she hardly knew, but the creature was certainly stimulating. And the future looked less gray. She would have felt no desire to go to the wild parties she had read about during those long days on the desert, even were her grandmother well and amenable, but if the other girls were as amusing as Polly she would have a lot of fun with them.

California had helped her, but it was time for another superstructure.

What would it be like? For a moment her feet in their heavy boy's shoes danced on the path. Then she saw Topper approaching and tried to look indifferent and dignified.

"Mrs. Carteret would like to see you, miss," said the old butler, who never looked otherwise than dignified.

She ran into the house and up the stair and for the first time showed a smiling face at the door of the sick-room. The old lady was sitting up in bed, an old-fashioned jewel-casket open beside her. She gave her grandchild a sharp glance.

"So! What you needed was young folks," she commented dryly. "Polly Pleyden is a frivolous, fast, pert, painted minx, but I suppose she's better than nothing. If she'd been properly brought up she'd have called a day or two after your arrival. But never mind Polly. Come here. I've something to show you."

Gita, more interested in the contents of the casket than in her grandmother's opinion of Polly Pleyden, came to the side of the bed and bent over a tray of necklaces, bracelets, rings, and brooches. The settings were old-fashioned, but the stones: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, were of fair size and perfect clarity. For the moment she felt acutely feminine. Her eyes sparkled and she touched them lingeringly with her finger-tips. She had read stories demonstrating the fascination of jewels, but had never imagined that her own response would be keen and ardent. In jewelers' windows she had not given them more than a casual glance. But to be as close to them as this! To touch them, to bend low over their fire. . . . For a moment she was almost angry.

"Lift out that tray," said Mrs. Carteret.

The next held a rope of pearls, large, evenly matched, very white, and with a sheen that gave Gita a curious thrill. There was a sense of life, of mystery . . . strangely remote and desirable.

"I always wore them at night until lately to keep them from dying. They are to be yours, of course. Put them on."

Gita lifted the pearls over her head reverently, and ran to a mirror. "Are they really for me?" she gasped. "How can I thank you, grandmother! I never knew that pearls were beautiful before. But these! Mine!"

"Oh! You're not a boy after all! Good." Then as Gita frowned she added hastily, "Come back and lift out this tray."

In the large compartment beneath was a heavy and hideous tiara of diamonds and emeralds. Mrs. Carteret sighed. "I suppose you'll never wear it. I'm told such things are no longer in fashion. But many's the time I wore it in the old Academy of Music—and in Covent

Garden. Evelyn wore it in her day and was the most splendid figure in the Metropolitan Opera House. Her husband sent it back to me when she died. . . . Well, you can have the stones made into a necklace when you are older."

"I? Am I to have all these wonderful jewels?"

"Who else? But you are not to sell them."

"I'd never dream of selling them. When I'm blue I'll just take them out and play with them."

"That is the first sensible thing I've heard you say. And many are heirlooms, remember. . . . There was a magnificent diamond necklace your grandfather gave me, but it went to pay racing-debts after an unfortunate season at Saratoga. He was a good man, but insane about horses. I often feel thankful he died before this era of shrieking motors. They would have broken his heart. Sit down and play with these things now. I see they have cast a spell over you and I am beginning to feel hopeful."

Gita took a low chair beside the bed and poured the contents of the upper tray into her lap, letting the chains run through her fingers, trying on the bracelets and rings. The fine stones seemed to wink at her knowingly.

"They'll have to be reset," said the old lady sadly. "Tout passe. Now," she added briskly, "there's another thing I want you to promise. If you don't I'll leave every one of these jewels to a hospital."

"Grandmother! Blackmail! What is it?"

"You must wear mourning for me. I'm told it's more or less out of date, but I believe in the decencies of life. You say neither you nor your mother approved of mourning, but that has nothing to do with me. You will do as I ask, I suppose?"

"Of course." Gita was in a mood to promise anything.

"Well, that's one point gained! And six months will be enough. I'm only your grandmother. But after that you are to dress not only like a girl, but a fashionable girl; you'll give those ridiculous suits to the servants."

"But all the girls wear tailored suits—and as for sport——"

"Like yours? No furbishing up?"

"Oh, they wear scarves and bright hats—other things, I suppose. I've hardly noticed."

"But you have noticed they indulge in every feminine vanity, even if they've cut off the hair that Nature meant to be woman's chief adornment and have neither the full busts nor the swelling hips that once made a beautiful woman's 'figger,' as we called it. And the tiny waists!"

"They must have looked horrid," said Gita sincerely.

"Not at all. Quite the contrary. I wonder men are ever attracted to women these days. Nature intended women to have figures entirely different from men. Else why didn't she make them on the same plan and save them the trouble of starving themselves? Answer me that!" said the old lady triumphantly. "A girl in my day, my daughters' day, had no chance if she looked like a lath. She padded. And these young ninnies of today may have a certain style but not a particle of elegance. No wonder they wear little straight frocks. It takes a figger to show off elegant gowns. What in the world started such a fashion?" she asked querulously. "Do you mean to tell me men admire girls that look like boys?"

"They seem to. Probably that's the reason the girls have sacrificed woman's chief adornment."

"But men used to rave over woman's tresses."

"Well, the men nowadays don't rave much except over

bootleggers and motors. Perhaps that's the reason they want the girls to look as much like themselves as possible. Or maybe they're more in love with themselves than ever since the war and the girls imitate them without realizing it is a sort of subtle flattery." Gita was unconsciously groping. She had never given the matter a thought.

Mrs. Carteret cackled, her frail body shaking. "I suppose that's the reason you shaved your head, didn't even leave a few locks in front to cover your ears and soften your forehead!"

"I?" Gita forgot the jewels. "I should think not. It's about the last reason!"

"Well, jewels and hairless heads don't go together. It will be a good time to let your hair grow, while you're in mourning, and some clever hair-dresser will find a way to tuck it up. I suppose it is naturally straight but it could be waved. And that reminds me. I am making you promise a good many things but this is one of the most important. When the proper time comes Mary Pleyden will introduce you to Society, and you are to go to the best dressmaker you can afford and wear the most elaborate clothes that fashion permits."

"Nothing is very elaborate these days."

"So I understand. But you are to dress like other girls—the most sensible and feminine. That's all I have to ask. Is it understood?"

"Yes, grandmother, but I don't care for clothes, really——"

"Never had 'em. That's the reason. You're a stoic, I imagine, and wouldn't permit yourself to want what you couldn't have. Wait until you have a wardrobe full of pretty things."

Gita shrugged her thin shoulders. "Perhaps. But I

don't care for society either, grandmother. I—I—don't know how to dance."

"I never heard of such a thing! But you can learn, I suppose. You're naturally graceful. You wouldn't be a Carteret if you weren't."

Gita hastily changed the subject. "And I never know what to talk to men about. I'd really rather live quietly here and go over to New York occasionally—to the theater and concerts and lectures. And the opera! I haven't been to an opera since I was fourteen."

"Shocking! Well, go to the opera and show yourself. And as for men they'll soon teach you what to talk about, or you're not a Carteret. We were all great gabblers. Now, put those jewels back in the casket and put that in the wall-safe over there behind the open panel, before that nurse comes back. She may be as good as she looks, but I never trust outsiders. I told her to send up Topper and he got it out for me. You may keep the pearls. Wear them as often as you can."

After Gita had hidden the casket she returned to the bedside and brushed her lips against the old lady's tabid cheek. "You are very kind and generous, grandmother," she said gratefully.

"Thanks!" Mrs. Carteret's voice was as dry as usual but her eyes gleamed. "And your lips are very soft, my dear. Here comes that woman. It is time for your dinner. And when you have replenished your wardrobe I hope you will dress for dinner every night, even when you are alone."

CHAPTER V

THAT was Gita's last talk with her grandmother. The next day Mr. Donald called, and on the following the old lady had what the nurse alluded to vaguely as one of her attacks. Two nights later she died quietly in her sleep. At the earliest moment consistent with cherished proprieties, Topper telephoned to Mrs. Pleyden, and she came to the manor an hour later.

"Polly had a telegram from Bar Harbor yesterday asking her to a house-party," she said sympathetically to Gita, looking as if she would kiss her if she dared, "and she went off last night. But she'll be home in a few days and I know she'd want you to come to us for a bit. You will, won't you, my dear? You've hardly had time to get accustomed to this gloomy old house. Do run up and pack a bag."

But Gita shook her head. She felt uncommonly bereft. Her grandmother was a person to be missed, whether she had unconsciously grown fond of her or not. At all events she felt a desire to stand by until the last of the ceremonies. And the old house, in which so many of her blood had lived and died, mysteriously held her.

"You are very kind," she said. "And I'll be glad to see Polly when she comes back. But I'd better stay here. I'm sure grandmother would have wished it. If—if—you'll attend to things, though, I'd be grateful."

"I will indeed." Mrs. Pleyden was a tall slender woman, admirably dressed and poised, but although her

life for the most part was spent in a round of bridge, she was by nature executive and always willing to exercise her talent. Her house in Chelsea and her apartment in New York were models of bland extravagance and housewifely skill. In an earlier day she would have been a "leader," and, as it was, her large and exclusive circle deferred to her and regarded her as a personage. Between herself and Polly there was an unspoken compact. Mrs. Pleyden moved with the times, and life had taught her philosophy.

"Better go out of doors," she continued. "Perhaps you will change your mind later, but meanwhile don't stay in the house any more than you can help. I'll do the telephoning, and Topper always knows what to do. He's seen many a funeral in this house."

Gita shuddered and went out into the garden.

The more intimate of her grandmother's friends were in and out constantly during the next three days. Flowers arrived by the motor-load. The heavy perfume in the unaired rooms was unendurable. It seemed to Gita as if all the dead Carterets had fertilized the roots of those flowers and contributed their odor of decay.

The old lady lay in state, not in the drawing-room but in the great central hall. Her face looked like an ancient wax mask. It was devoid of expression, and it had had so much in life! Gita did not give it a second glance. She preferred to remember that wise sarcastic old face on the pillows, lit by the indomitable dark brilliancy of the eyes.

Mrs. Pleyden had telephoned to a New York house for Gita's mourning and it arrived early on the day of the funeral. It was merely a straight little frock of crêpe de Chine and a black straw hat like an inverted bowl, from which a short veil of chiffon depended. Gita wondered what her grandmother would have thought of it. Her

crêpe veils no doubt had trailed the ground like those of the afflicted in French provincial towns.

She rummaged in the drawers of a chest in the old lady's room and found a long necklace of jet and oxidized silver and put it on. The act made her feel less modern than usual, but she thought, somewhat humorously, that her grandmother would approve of this subtle, if momentary, linking of her unruly descendant with the past.

She had heard the rolling of many motors, and as she descended the broad stair she saw that the hall as well as the large and smaller drawing-rooms were crowded with ladies and gentlemen, who, as she learned later, had come not only from Atlantic City, but from Philadelphia and many of the country estates in New Jersey. It was a last tribute from friends and acquaintances that would have pleased Mrs. Carteret, although she would have regarded it as a matter of course. The Carteret funerals had always been affairs of state, a signal for all affiliated clans.

There were even reporters on the lawn.

Topper, in a rusty dress suit, once in the wardrobe of Mr. Carteret, and black gloves, was master of ceremonies, and Andrew, the old gardener, bent nearly double with rheumatism, had been given a chair near the casket. The other servants, housemaid and cook, were more recent acquisitions, but sniffled audibly. Topper's eyes were red, but no Carteret could have presented a more immobile front to the world.

Mr. Donald, the family lawyer, met Gita at the foot of the stair and offered his arm. She was conscious of a ripple of decorous interest and several hundred examining eyes as they made their way to the upper end of the hall and took the seats reserved for them. There were no young people present. Polly, who had returned the

night before, had telephoned that she would be over after the funeral; she would pass out if she found herself at one of those hang-overs of barbarism.

Gita privately made up her own mind that it was the last funeral she would ever attend. In an effort to look grave the company was as if suddenly bereft of individuality, and all the women who possessed black gowns wore them whether they were cut in the latest fashion or not. The pall-bearers, most of them keen business or professional men, looked like expressionless mutes. Mr. Donald, who was one of them, wore a band of black cloth on his sleeve and flourished a handkerchief with a black border. Polly would have said he looked like a walking monument to conservatism, but he was an urbane and pleasant person, inclined to be fatherly in manner to his younger clients and had been sincerely attached to Mrs. Carteret.

The atmosphere was sickening. The day was hot and close. Several of the women surreptitiously inhaled smelling-salts. The clergyman in his Episcopal robes droned on interminably. Not a phrase of the long funeral service could be omitted on so august an occasion. Gita felt as if she were on the verge of hysterics. At her mother's simple funeral on the desert, where Millicent had asked to be buried—she was "tired of traveling"—Gita had felt only numbness and desolation, and had passively permitted herself, when it was over, to be carried off to San Francisco by Mrs. Melrose to await a possible letter from Carteret Manor. The numbness had not passed until she found herself alone in the train, free of solicitudes and plans for her future, should Mrs. Carteret ignore her. But today she felt a wild desire to laugh and shock some sort of expression into these portentously solemn faces. What a comedy! They were

swooning with boredom and tuberoses, and what one of them had really cared for her grandmother? More than once they must have writhed under her merciless tongue. But it was an inherited ritual to attend a Carteret funeral and they were stern devotees of the passing conventions.

The sonorous voice rounded its final period. There was a sigh, a rustle. Mr. Donald left her to join the pall-bearers. Mrs. Pleyden took her firmly by the arm and led her past many staring eyes to her own motor.

"You are going with me to the cemetery," she said kindly, "and then I'll turn you over to Mr. Donald, who'll bring you home and read the will to you in the library. . . . Abominable!" She had heard the click of a camera. "But your features will hardly be distinguishable through that veil. I only hope the paper is one that decent people take in." She looked askance at the necklace but concluded to ignore it. Tact never failed her.

CHAPTER VI

THE casket had been placed on its shelf in the Carteret vault and wreaths and crosses piled to the roof. Mr. Donald conducted Gita to his motor and they returned in silence to the manor. Gita drew a long breath. Her grandmother had made her final exit. She might regret, but she had mourned too deeply for her mother to confuse regret with grief. And she was conscious of a thrill of expectation. She had seen plays where wills were read by a solemn lawyer to a solemn family and thought them highly dramatic. Now she was to be the central figure in such a scene and that old library would be a proper setting.

Topper was standing in the hall. She gave him her first order.

"Please send all these flowers that are left to some hospital—at once. And open every window in the house."

Topper, who distrusted fresh air even by day, shook his head in protest, but his eyes fell before the dark imperious gaze that had mastered his will for seventy-odd years. He had never expected to have a young mistress in his old age, and he and Andrew retired to the pantry and wept into two generous glasses of old port.

Gita followed Mr. Donald into the library and opened its windows herself. It was a very large room with books to the ceiling, galleries, alcoves, flights of steps. Over the paneled oak mantel was a half-length portrait of her grandfather, at which she had scowled more than once; it bore a fatal resemblance to her father. The room,

when closed, had that subtle odor of death that comes from rotting calf, and, possibly, from those silent emanations of brains long still. But when the sunlight poured in and the salt winds from the Atlantic purified the air, it looked less like a tomb of dead thought, merely a dignified old library in a stately old manor house.

Gita took a chair close to one of the windows and Mr. Donald settled himself with a sigh of relief in a large leather chair by the central table.

"This has been a trying day," he said, "and I am not as young as I was. I shall miss my old friend, who was a remarkable woman, Miss Carteret, a remarkable woman."

"Yes," said Gita sincerely, "she was. I wish I could have known her longer—and that she could have been sixty instead of eighty."

Mr. Donald looked at her approvingly. Proper sentiments, certainly. Hardly to have been expected perhaps, brought up as she had been, and with her boyish hardness. He had never before seen a Carteret who did not look feminine, however imperious. He had met her twice before and had anticipated impatience, slang, and a total lack of respect. But Gita looked rather meek sitting there by the window and quite properly subdued. She had laid aside her hat, and her rough cropped head, which had excited her grandmother's ire, and no less his own, was bent over a honeysuckle bush, inhaling its delicate fragrance.

It was a beautiful head. Mr. Donald studied it against the light, and with approval. Lines of face and head perfectly balanced. Set on a long throat. Small high ears. A spirited profile and the magnificent black eyes of the Carterets. It was something, at least, that this girl was a Carteret in looks. But what was she inside

that almost blasphemous exterior? Had she any regard for tradition, or would she take the bit in her teeth, laugh at his advice, sell the manor in spite of her promise to her grandmother, and behave like a young colt generally? She looked as if her next step would be to wear trousers, and Mr. Donald, who gave the present generation of young people his unqualified disapproval, wished she were more like them and less like an absent-minded compound of Old Dame Nature. He was a mere sixty, but he had inherited the Carterets from his father and known many of them, although none that gave him a clew to this last of the line. However, he was used to trouble and generally knew how to deal with it.

He cleared his throat, adjusted his spectacles, and opening his bag, drew out a document.

"This is the last will and testament of your grandmother," he said solemnly, "and, as is customary, it is my duty to read it to the family immediately after the final ceremonies."

"Yes," said Gita, smiling, "I always wanted to hear a will read. I know what is in it, but it will be fu—interesting, all the same."

Mr. Donald frowned. "This is not an occasion for levity, my dear Miss Carteret."

"Of course. Sorry. But I really do want to hear a will read."

"Are you romantic?" asked Mr. Donald hopefully.

"Good lord, no! But I have a sense of drama."

"Well, I shall not argue the point. But I think—first—may I ring for Topper and order a glass of sherry? This really has been a very trying day."

"Indeed, yes!" There was no lack of Carteret hospitality at least.

Topper brought the sherry and retired. Mr. Donald filled two glasses, handed one to Gita, and lifted his own gallantly. "Here's to your very good health, Miss Carteret, and a long and useful life."

"Thanks," said Gita dryly, but drinking the sherry, of which she suddenly felt the need. "Same to you. But please call me Gita. Miss Carteret doesn't suit me at all."

"Ah!—well, yes—I'll call you Gita with pleasure. And now I shall read this last testament of my dear old friend."

He began to read in a dry legal voice. Gita, warmed by the sherry, smiled at the lines beginning: "Being of sound mind," etc. Nothing more aptly could have described her grandmother.

Mrs. Carteret, after generous bequests to Topper and Andrew, left her entire fortune to Gita, with instructions that she give her late grandfather's studs, cuff-links and scarf-pins to Mr. Donald, who was named sole executor of the estate.

"It consists of this house and grounds, two farms, a house on States Avenue, Atlantic City, and good securities," Mr. Donald informed his client. "There are no mortgages. The value of the estate after the inheritance tax has been paid will be something under two hundred thousand dollars. The rent of the house in Atlantic City just about pays for itself these days, what with taxes and repairs. When the present lease expires I should advise you to sell it. It was built for your grand-uncle, Byllynge Carteret, who left it to your grandfather in payment for moneys borrowed at various times. Most of those old homes have been turned into boarding-houses, since fashion moved out to Chelsea, and summer visitors come

to Atlantic City in increasing hordes—the great majority of whom cannot afford the hotels on the Boardwalk. But——" He paused, coughed, and polished his spectacles. "I hope, my dear Gita, that you do not contemplate selling or even renting the manor."

"I shall not sell it, but I certainly shall rent it if I should at any time want a larger income."

"That would be almost as bad," grumbled Mr. Donald, who, however, was relieved. "Of course it is rather a dismal home for a young girl, and I can imagine you would prefer to live for a time in a large city; but I feel sure that later in life you will be glad to know that you still possess this historic old manor of your ancestors."

"My ancestors are not worrying me. I'm glad I've no relations to ding-dong about them. But I like the old place and I intend to hang on to it."

"Ah—yes—well, I'm glad to hear that. May I ask if you have any immediate plans?"

"I intend to stay here for the present."

"Couldn't do better. Finest climate in the world."

"Better say that to a Californian! Must you go?"

Mr. Donald had disposed of his spectacles and risen. "I am very grateful to you," added his young hostess with unexpected graciousness. "And to my grandmother. If she hadn't left me all this I'd have had to go to work. I hate work, and all the insincere jargon about it. Nobody works who doesn't have to, even those who have great gifts that demand expression. They merely go on mental jags and enjoy themselves. Otherwise there's no joy in work well done. The only joy is not having to do it."

Mr. Donald was returning to his office to prepare a case to be argued in court next morning and felt no

inclination to exhaust himself in debate with a young woman who would probably fling one defiance after another at his head under the impression that she was modern. He answered suavely:

"Very creditable of you to think for yourself. And it certainly would be unbecoming for one of the Carteret ladies to work for her living."

"That isn't worrying me, either. My objections to looking for a job and holding it down are purely personal."

"You are very modern." Mr. Donald sighed.

"Oh, that's rather old-fashioned."

"I mean in your complete indifference to tradition. But that seems to be one of the many phases of the present unrest. The war no doubt. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Of course you will continue to take care of the estate? I am hopelessly ignorant."

"With the greatest pleasure!" Another apprehension was laid. In money matters at least this young rebel did not purpose to take the bit between her teeth. "And remember, if you need advice of any kind my services are at your immediate disposal."

"I'd like to sell the house in Atlantic City at once and renovate this. I'll keep the best of the furniture, of course, but the rest will go to the stables. My grandmother's room I shall keep intact—as a memorial to the Carterets!"

"Well, I can't blame you. But the lease of the house on States Avenue has a year to run. After the inheritance tax has been disposed of I'll see what can be done."

"Thanks. Sooner the better. Perhaps I could per-

suade the Pelhams to get out. Topper says they left cards and that gives me an excuse to call on them."

Mr. Donald gave his smallest and tightest smile. "Try, by all means," he said. "And your luck seems to have changed. Now, I must really bid you good-day. I shall be over again shortly with papers to sign."

CHAPTER VII

It was Easter Sunday and Gita was strolling along the Boardwalk. Mr. Donald had considerately sent her a check and she had bought a small black sailor hat, which she wore on the back of her head that her cropped hair should further demonstrate her complete indifference to feminine allure. She had also invested in a black sport skirt that she might be able to keep one hand in a pocket, and in the other she carried a swagger-stick. A stiff white shirtwaist and black tie completed her toilette. She flattered herself that she looked like a boy masquerading as a girl and was somewhat disconcerted when no less than two passing men murmured, "Cutie." Then she was abruptly a haughty young woman—and a Carteret—freezing impertinent libertines.

"But if I only *were* a boy," she sighed. "I don't believe I'd even mind work. And girls are ten thousand times nicer than men. Then I could fall in love with one of them, and now that is forever denied me."

But she did not really feel sad. The warm gold sun rode in an unflecked sky. The sea rolled in to the white sands in long sparkling indolent waves. Over the hard beach young people were riding horseback and children were driving little carts, or building in the sand. A great liner drifted on the horizon.

The Boardwalk was so crowded that Gita was forced to move at a far more leisurely pace than her habit, and it seemed to her that in all that vast throng there was but one expression: a composite expression of vacant content-

ment. If they were subject to the common misfortunes and cares of humanity, for the present they were unable to recall them.

Here and there she saw a woman fashionably dressed, but to what world she belonged Gita did not hazard a guess. There were perhaps a hundred tailor-made girls, as slim as laths, very trim, very conscious that they were turned out by one of the autocrats of fashion. But the mass were frankly tourists with no money to spend on anything but cheap imitations of the prevailing styles. There were college boys arm in arm and walking four abreast, and large carefully dressed males with roving predatory eyes.

In the close monotonous procession of rolling chairs propelled up and down the middle of the broad promenade by colored men or white derelicts, were couples too fat and overfed to walk or too old and tired. A few elderly ladies and gentlemen looked as if they may have sauntered on the Walk in its heyday and still came for the ozone which no change in fashion could alter.

Gita wondered what the façade of Atlantic City had looked like when these devitalized relics were in their prime. Today hotels of varying magnificence, with at least one triumph of modern architecture, were connected by a flimsy chain of low-browed buildings: Japanese or Chinese curio-shops; shops for linen, lingerie, sweaters and blouses; candy-stores; shops devoted exclusively to salt-water taffy, "cut to fit the mouth"; restaurants, motion-picture theaters, bookstores, shoe-stores, milliners; displays of costumes unapproachable in elegance and price; cigar stands, cheap rooming-houses, toy-stores, drug-stores, auction-rooms, art-shops of highest and lowest quality; booths where silhouettes were taken while you wait, stands for post-cards, newspapers, magazines; jew-

elers; five-and-ten-cent stores. Interrupted at set intervals by flights of steps or "inclines" leading down to the avenues of Atlantic City. Opposite, reaching far out into the water, six monstrous piers offering concerts, soft drinks, moving pictures, tearooms, ballrooms, and long decks for chairs.

It was a scene both vulgar and splendid, extravagant and tawdry, mean and aspiring. If a tidal wave washed away all but the hotels it would have a certain stark magnificence, but the miles of pigmy shops gave it the appearance of a chain of village Main Streets that made the great hotels, not themselves, look alien.

Nevertheless the ensemble was gay and exhilarating. Above the mass-murmur of voices rose the cry of the barkers and the deep surge of the Atlantic. These slowly moving smiling crowds gave to the scene an air of careless and unqualified leisure to be found nowhere else in the world.

Behind and below the Boardwalk, between the Inlet and Iowa Avenue, Atlantic City proper, a dignified town of a prevailing gray tone, rambled back to the Thoroughfares and the salt marshes, and on the south merged into the faubourg of Chelsea. It was a town with a life of its own and regarded its façade as almost if not wholly negligible. Its social life, like that of other small towns, revolved about its churches, Episcopalianism representing the flake of the crust, and its women's clubs were often storm-centers of politics. The men had their professional and business clubs, and some sixty leading citizens met for a weekly luncheon at one of the city hotels either to talk business or forget it, and to sing, with the abandon of boys, the sentimental songs of their youth. Atlantic Avenue, a broad if unpicturesque thoroughfare, had its enormous trolleys that went from the Inlet to

Longport, at the southern tip of the island; but Pacific Avenue, with its fine Public Library, its churches and reserved private houses, relied on the humble jitney.

It was not a bustling city but it had a constant surge of life, and there was no apparent poverty except in the negro quarter, whose denizens found compensation in a conscious political power. And it was a proud city, for all its streets were avenues, its shops were serenely independent of the extortionists on the Boardwalk, the best of its private houses looked like dignified old folks, well preserved but with no pretensions to youth, and its air was tonic. Visitors in the great frontal hotels, looking down on the quiet little gray city, assumed that oyster-dredging was still its main industry, and the humbler patrons of the hundreds of hotels and boarding-houses of the town accepted it as an annex to the Boardwalk and knew as little of its life as of its history.

Gita had often wandered about the town, which attracted her more than Chelsea or Ventnor, for although far from contemporary with the manor it represented the vision and enterprise of that group of men, including her great-grandfather, who had founded it in the early fifties, and now it had an elderly dignity and beauty of its own.

Her slow progress had brought her to the incline that led down into States Avenue and she edged her way to the rail and looked over at a large gray wooden house with a round pointed tower. It was on the north side of the avenue—once but a footpath leading from the old United States Hotel to the beach—and, like its neighbors, belonged to a definite and debased period of American architecture. Many of her enterprising great-grandfather's friends had left Philadelphia to become permanent residents of the new city, either for business reasons

or for fashion, and this street demonstrated their theories of comfort and grandeur. A few of their descendants had magnificent houses out on the avenues of Chelsea or Ventnor, others had succumbed to adverse fortune and quietly disappeared. A very few perhaps still lived where their fathers or grandfathers had built. Several of these old houses, once the pride of Atlantic City, were boarding-houses for the better class of vacationists who could not afford the palaces on the Boardwalk.

Gita had spent two hours on that famous promenade and not seen a familiar face. Nor was she likely to see one if she spent the day there. Polly and the girls she had brought to the manor during the past week scorned it wholeheartedly. They might exercise there in the early morning and swim off their secluded beach when the ocean recovered from the chill of winter, but to show themselves in "that crowd" had no part in their program of aristocratic democracy.

Gita, who had entertained her new friends in aired and sunny rooms from which at least a third of the furniture had been removed to the stables (by two stalwart sons of her farmers, the while Topper and Andrew muttered a continuous protest) had lost her desire for solitude, and wondered if the Pelhams were at home. Easter Sunday was no time for a formal call, but Gita, whether fundamentally a Carteret or not, ignored the conventions when it suited her purpose.

She descended the incline and strolled up the avenue to the least remunerative of her possessions. The blinds were raised and several of the windows were open. It was after twelve and if the Pelhams had attended church, as no doubt they had—the church, if not religion, playing so dominant a part in the lives of their kind—they would have returned. The midday dinner and

Easter Sunday! Gita shrugged her shoulders and ran up the long flight of steps: the house, following the rule, was built above a high cellar as a precaution against the rare but always possible furies of the sea.

But the Pelhams had a late breakfast on Sunday and an early supper. When the colored maid brought up Miss Carteret's name they were in their respective bedrooms enjoying the somnolent ease that followed a morning well spent. Chelsea had no more contempt for the Boardwalk than States Avenue.

Mrs. Pelham was the first to descend. She was offended at the informality but as curious as her daughter to see this heir of the Carterets, who had been the subject of much rumor and several newspaper paragraphs.

She was a very tall woman, thin and austere, with iron-gray hair dressed high and flat, and wore a gray dress over corsets as rigid as herself. Even the gold-framed spectacles did not soften her expression. She was a member of the church most active in local politics and all reforms, and the president of a very important club.

Gita felt like making a face but advanced and held out her hand in Millicent's prettiest manner. "Mrs. Pelham? I am Gita Carteret and I do hope you won't mind the informality of this call."

"Oh, not at all," said Mrs. Pelham stiffly. "Won't you sit down? It is very polite of you to call so soon. I hardly expected to see you for several weeks."

An ambiguous remark, but Gita replied sweetly:

"I was feeling lonesome after two hours on the Boardwalk and had a sudden desire to meet old friends of my grandmother."

Mrs. Pelham looked as if about to thaw, then darted a suspicious glance at her visitor. "Hardly that. I used to meet Mrs. Carteret occasionally when we sat on the

same charitable boards, and she was once very kind when I was ill. But I did not feel that I had known her well enough to attend the funeral. Of course I left cards."

Is this class-consciousness? thought Gita. Do self-respecting Americans really recognize county?

"You were lucky not to feel you had to," she replied warmly. "It was ghastly. Public funerals—and weddings—should be abolished; don't you think so? Both are indecent."

"I certainly do not agree with you. I rank both among the *decencies* of life." She looked at Gita as if she approved of nothing about her, but it was a look to which Gita was inured and she merely smiled and crossed her knees, swinging a foot conspicuous in an Oxford bought in the boys' department of a shoe-store.

She broke a silence that threatened to induce hysteria, recalling the gossip of Topper, who knew the lineage and habits of every family from Egg Harbor to Cape May. "I hear you go in tremendously for good works. That must get away with a lot of time."

"My time is fully occupied and I certainly do my duty as I see it."

"Oh—ah—yes. I've heard that Atlantic City is particularly fortunate in its women citizens. . . ." And then she sprang into the arena. "I suppose you always intend to live here?"

"Most certainly. I was born in Atlantic City—we once had our own house but it burned down—and I expect to die here. I hope you will renew the lease of this house when it expires—but of course you leave business details to Mr. Donald?"

There was a hint of anxiety in her rasping voice.

"Not altogether. I—— You wouldn't like to buy the house, would you?"

"I should like nothing better, but unfortunately I am unable to afford it." There was a gleam of real apprehension in her hard gray eyes as she stared at Gita.

"I am afraid I must sell it, then." Gita was now completely indifferent to the impression she was making on this disagreeable person as well as to the fact of Easter Sunday. "You see, it brings me in no income whatever and I really need more money."

"I cannot give up this house!" Gita almost jumped. There was a note of fighting passion in the woman's voice. "I have lived in it for thirty years. My children were born in it."

"Oh—I'm sorry." She felt curiously disconcerted, almost sympathetic, but after all she was not turning paupers into the street. "Perhaps—I hardly know what to say. Mr. Donald advised me——"

"I could take in paying guests. We have several spare rooms. I never expected to come to that but I'd do it and pay you more rent."

"It isn't so much a matter of income——" And then she rose with a sigh of relief. A girl was coming down the stairs, and she looked as unlike her presumable mother as possible.

Mrs. Pelham stood up. "My daughter, Mrs. Brewster—Miss Carteret," she said in her stiff precise manner. "I hope you will excuse me for a few moments." And she hastily left the room.

" 'Mrs!' " said Gita, smiling once more as she resumed her seat on a chair as hard as any at Carteret Manor. "I was sure you were a girl like myself."

"I am only twenty-six, and I'm a widow. My husband died a few months after our marriage. But that seems a long time ago—I was just twenty. I hear this is your first visit East. I hope you like it."

And they exchanged easy commonplaces on the fertile subject of the Boardwalk and Atlantic City.

Mrs. Brewster was as slim as Gita and hardly as tall. She, also, held herself erectly, but without stiffness; her dark blue frock was of excellent material fashionably cut; and, observed Gita, who had an eye for clothes, singular in one who disdained them, as well "put on" as Polly's. Her brown hair was cut short and brushed back from a brow of unfashionable nobility, and her large light eyes were both intelligent and humorous. Gita thought she had never seen a more emphatic little nose nor a more determined chin. If she had ever suffered she bore no trace and looked as if her vision would always be set toward the future in confidence and hope.

As the conversation became more personal Gita learned that Mrs. Brewster was buyer for one of the department stores on Atlantic Avenue, a position that took her frequently to Philadelphia and New York. She felt slightly bewildered. It was her first acquaintance with a girl of the business class, and she had assumed vaguely that all members of that order were hard and common. She had once dreaded a similar fate, and although, she told herself, she could not be harder, she had wondered if she would wholly forget the anxious training and admonitions of her mother. But Millicent might have had the bringing-up of Elsie Brewster. Gita wondered if she were a snob and felt secretly humiliated.

"But you don't like work?" she asked, determined to get to the root of the matter. "You—you look, rather, as if you were both a student and fond of a good time like other girls. Once I thought I should have to go to work, and, frankly, I hated the bare idea."

Mrs. Brewster smiled. "If you have to do a thing it is better to like it than hate it, don't you think? But

you are rather shrewd, you know. As a matter of fact I am fond of reading and study, and my job leaves me a good many hours of leisure. I also love good times, of course, but when you have a certain object in life——" Her voice faltered and she blushed and glanced hesitatingly at this odd visitor who looked like a boy with an eager girl's face, and whom she had thought at first she should find detestable. But Miss Carteret was not in the least like other masculine women she had met, and when she forgot to be hard and crisp her voice had deep warm notes that were as attractive an anomaly as those long black eyelashes under that awful sailor hat.

"Yes?" asked Gita, who was now neither the polite Miss Carteret nor the aggressive lad but merely one girl interested in another. "Do tell me what is the object."

Elsie Brewster smiled as warmly in response and succumbed to the revulsion of feeling. "You see—I lead a double life."

"What!" Gita's eyes sparkled. There was no mystery whatever about Polly and her group. "What on earth do you mean? You're not secretly married again—— Oh! No! That would be too commonplace."

"I should think so. No—but this is quite a secret—my ambition is to be a writer—a novelist, if possible. I've had a few things accepted by the magazines: two or three by the best, others just anywhere my agent could place them. Of course it will be a long time before I can make a real income out of writing and give up my job—my mother's income hardly covers the rent of this house and her subscriptions to charities, and club dues—what I make supports us very comfortably. Reputation—the kind that is remunerative, at least—takes time; but I know I shall succeed in the end!"

"You look as if you would." Gita glowed with en-

thusiasm. "I'm frightfully interested. I do wish I had a gift. But I should think that after a hard day's work you'd be too tired to write."

"Sometimes I am, but as a rule I manage to put in three or four hours at night."

"I think you are wonderful! Where do you write your stories?" She glanced around the stiff inhospitable room, furnished in the reps of the seventies. "In your bedroom?"

"Oh, no, I have a real study. Should you like to see it?"

"Shouldn't I! Lead me to it."

She followed Mrs. Brewster down the long hall and into a small room fitted up with a large flat desk to which a typewriter was firmly attached, a swivel chair, revolving bookcases, stands for dictionary and atlas, and a filing cabinet.

"Businesslike, isn't it?" asked the young author. "I'm afraid system has become a part of my nature, and am always wondering if it will cramp my imagination."

"Why should it? I'm horribly disorderly myself and can't do a thing. . . . Is—is this a story?"

She was standing by the desk and she passed her hand with a lingering touch over a pile of manuscript, much as she had fingered her grandmother's jewels.

"Yes. I finished it last night, and it will start off tomorrow on what may be a long and adventurous journey. But if it were rejected by every editor in the country nothing could take away my pleasure in writing it!" she exclaimed with sudden passion.

"I'll bet it couldn't." Gita's eyes roved over the little room; it seemed to her the most personal room she had ever entered. "Do you write all your stories here?" she asked.

"Yes. I don't believe I could write anywhere else. If I used the word 'atmosphere' I suppose you would think I was talking cant."

"No, I shouldn't." But her heart sank. And then she sighed. The manor would have to wait. She would not turn Elsie out of this room if Mr. Donald talked his head off, although it would have given her acute pleasure to annoy that disagreeable old woman. "I—I really came today to give a gentle hint to Mrs. Pelham that I intended to sell the house when the lease expired, but you may tell her I've changed my mind. You see, it tickles my vanity to think that great books may be written in a house belonging to me."

"Oh!" Elsie Brewster had turned white. "You—— Oh, you wouldn't! It's an ugly old shell but I love it, and I couldn't write anywhere else. I'd feel as if my roots had been torn up."

"Needn't give it another thought," said Gita briskly. "Cut it out. Don't you want to come over and see my old tomb?"

"I should like it very much. I have always longed to see the inside of that old manor. To tell you the truth I once made it the scene of a story, although I had to make up the inside."

"I am sure it was an improvement on the original. It couldn't be worse. Do get your hat and come along. I told my old butler not to have luncheon until half-past one. Do you mind walking?"

"I'd love a walk. Just a moment."

CHAPTER VIII

GITA, now that she was in command, had her meals served in the breakfast-room, as nothing could make cheerful, in the daytime at least, a long high room paneled to the ceiling, whose windows looked directly into somber pine woods. This little room, facing the garden, was bright and cheerful as the girls sat at lunch. It was a meal to satisfy the appetite rather than caress the palate, for Mrs. Carteret, during the last year of her life, had lived on broths, gruels, eggs, and milk, and the cook had "got her hand out," as she informed her new mistress somewhat apprehensively: it had been an easy place and to the grumbling of nurses she had been haughtily indifferent. Gita, who had a European palate for flavors, had no intention of keeping her and asked Mrs. Brewster if she knew of a good cook.

"I can't afford a chef, of course," she said, "and I don't know enough to train anyone, although I cooked for my mother and myself for a time in San Francisco. But I hate the sight of a kitchen and my accomplishments in that line were limited to meat and vegetables, generally overdone. But I should be able to get a fairly decent cook for what I pay this moron."

"I know just the thing." Elsie Brewster was delighted to be of service to this girl whom she liked more every moment and was anxious to study. "That is to say if your Topper would stand for it. The woman is colored."

"Topper's opinion will not be asked," said Gita coolly.

"He will suit his tastes to mine or leave. I have no sentiment about old servants, and I am sure he must have saved a lot, to say nothing of my grandmother's legacy. I'll make him a present of the discarded furniture and he can set up another boarding-house in Atlantic City! Send your darky along. I'm enormously obliged."

"Oh, do keep Topper!" cried Elsie. "What would an old manor be without an aged butler? He's an indispensable part of the tradition."

"Well, he can't live forever," said Gita practically. "And I think the less you bother about traditions the better you get along. Old servants think they own you, anyhow, and there'll be only one master in this house."

"I don't fancy he owned your grandmother. I used to see her sometimes when I went to the Episcopal church with a friend, and thought her quite the most imperious person I had ever seen. You looked just like her when you said that."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's only because I can have things my own way for the first time in my life."

Elsie looked at her speculatively, wondering how she could get this odd girl to talk about herself. Gita Carteret was a new type in her somewhat limited experience, and it was a confirmed habit to edge everyone she met under an avid and microscopic eye.

"You have met Miss Pleyden," she began tentatively. "I wonder what you think of her?"

"She's a good sort. So are several of the other girls she has brought here. Not unlike the San Francisco girls, only more so. But I never could live their life. I fancy I'm old before my time."

Mrs. Brewster laughed outright. "I never saw anyone look younger! It is difficult to believe you are twenty-two."

"Well," said Gita gloomily, "I ought to look forty."

"But you wouldn't like to look forty. Come, now, own up."

"You're right, I wouldn't." Gita was forced to smile. "I suppose that sounded like a grand little pose."

"I can't imagine you in a conscious pose of any sort. But, you know, youth can go through a lot without being hopelessly scarred. Otherwise—I have heard vaguely that you had a hard time for a few years, if you'll pardon me—you wouldn't look a bare eighteen when you are four years older. I felt very old myself at your age, for I had loved my young husband devotedly; and now I feel, and look, younger, and, I am willing to confide in you, I have almost forgotten the poor man."

She hoped, by throwing open a window in her own soul, to hear a quick rattling of the shutters opposite, but Gita replied with a frown: "Underground is the best place for husbands as far as my observation goes. I think you were in luck."

"Perhaps. Although he really was a delightful chap. Still, if he had lived there is no doubt I should be doing the plain domestic act today: several children, repetitional cares of a small house, teas and bridge-parties for diversion. I doubt if I ever should have found myself. The life of a business woman seems to me infinitely preferable, and if I didn't have this writing kink I'd be quite happy in it. Still, I think every woman should marry, even if it cannot last, one way or another. No woman can be thoroughly poised, able to look at life on all sides, and with a clear analytical eye, unless she has lived with a man in matrimony. Other thing is too one-sided."

"Some women, perhaps. And as you're a writer no doubt you have to know it all. But there is no necessity for the masculine woman to marry."

Elsie bent over her pudding. "Do you really think yourself masculine?" she asked indistinctly.

"Of course I am!" Gita's voice flew to its upper register. Her grandmother's and Polly's gibes had made little impression on her conscious mind. She ascribed them to personal interest and the conventional viewpoint.

"Then—I must ask it—I can't help it!—why don't you cut off your eyelashes?"

"Cut off my eyelashes!" Gita raised one narrow sunburnt hand and stroked them tenderly. "If you want the truth I love my eyelashes."

"Of course you do. And your lovely head and magnificent eyes and all the rest of your beauty, badly as you treat it. But, my dear, I am going to say it if you never speak to me again: you don't look the least like a boy and you never can."

She expected to witness a full and final exhibition of the Carteret temper, but to her surprise Gita answered gloomily: "I've begun to be afraid I don't. Two of those horrid men on the Boardwalk this morning tried to flirt with me."

"What did they say?" asked Elsie eagerly.

"I wouldn't repeat it." And her eyebrows were an unbroken black line above flaming eyes at the memory of being called "Cutie." She, Gita Carteret!

"It might be one thing and it might be another," observed Mrs. Brewster cryptically. "A girl trying to look like a boy would only amuse some men, but it might lead you into excessively disagreeable experiences with others. To say nothing of—well——"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I fancy you have seen too much of one side of life and very little of another. If you'll take my advice you will go up to New York—I'd love to go with you!—and

buy a lot of feminine frocks and hats. Of course you are in mourning but there are adorable black things."

"I hate feminine frocks. Besides, if I'm good-looking I never would be able to keep men off."

"You never will, anyway, but you might have a—well, more satisfactory measure of success if you cast yourself for the part of the cold and indifferent beauty. That's rather out of date, but as men today are averse from effort of any sort in their relations with women, accustomed to be met half-way, in short, I fancy you'd be able to manage. But do you really never intend to marry?"

"I really do not! If you knew what I know of men your books wouldn't be fit for publication. What sort of stories do you write, anyway? Realistic or romantic? Are those the terms?"

Once more Gita had eluded her, but she replied with every appearance of eager response: "Terms are out of date but principle remains the same. I write both. When I'm sad and tired I write romance, and when I'm feeling particularly buoyant, I write small-town stuff, with husbands going about the bedrooms in suspenders and forgetting to brush their teeth; and revolting wives (both ways) scraping out the kitchen sink. I always give particular prominence to grease. When the sink is clean, if it ever is, she turns her attention to the fly-specks and marks of heads on the wall-paper."

Gita's eyebrows were in their proper place and she was grinning delightedly. "I think you're a whacker!" she exclaimed. "Do you ever write of New York? That is the one city I long to see—I've barely had a glimpse of it. I'm going up to all the theaters and concerts and just walk the streets. Will you come along? I'd love to have you."

Mrs. Brewster's eyes glowed, but she answered firmly:

"I don't know anything I'd like better, but I simply won't walk the streets with you if you insist upon wearing those clothes—and that hat. In the first place it's a crime and in the second I dislike being conspicuous."

Gita looked sulkily at her plate. "I've dressed like this since I was sixteen. My mother didn't like it, and she was the only person I cared enough about to mind whether anyone liked it or not. But I'm used to it. I should feel awkward and intolerably strange any other way."

"Only for a time, and in mourning you wouldn't notice it so much. You'd be quite accustomed to it by the time you went into colors."

"I should feel as if a part of my personality had been lopped off."

"On the contrary, you'd give your personality its first chance to develop itself. If you really had a hard masculine face—the kind that goes with authentic masculoid characteristics—I wouldn't say a word. I'd not be interested enough. But your type of beauty—real beauty—is the sort to express itself through clothes. Do you really hate beautiful and expressive gowns?" she demanded. "Hate the sight of them on other women?"

"Oh, I like to look at them well enough. And I see at once if details are not right. I fancy I have what an old Frenchman I once knew called 'le sentiment de la toilette.' But all that is merely the same thing as knowing a good picture from a bad. I was dragged through all the picture galleries in Europe, and I lived in Paris off and on, where the women are the best dressed in the world. I appreciated them the more because I lived so much in French provincial towns, where the women are certainly the worst dressed in the world. And my mother had lovely things when I was little, and always managed to

look better in old rags made over than many that spent thousands a year. But I never longed for things myself—never gave it a thought."

"Because you had censored your mind so thoroughly. Don't you really think that if you hadn't—for reasons best known to yourself—adopted the rôle of pseudo-boy so young, you'd have been as feminine in all ways as other girls?"

Gita, quite unconscious of Elsie's delicate probing into her past, answered obstinately: "Never thought about it. Or if I had I'd have been glad of another excuse to spend as little as possible on myself. We were frightfully poor, and even in San Francisco, where, for a time, we thought the worst of our troubles were over, we just about made both ends meet. At least we couldn't save. If I'd been keen to dress like the other girls we'd have been in debt up to our necks."

Topper, who had received instructions to keep out of the room except when he was serving, had made his final exit some time since, but the girls lingered on with their coffee and cigarettes. Elsie made a curious zigzagging movement along the table with a spoon, denting the cloth; here and there she made an upward curve or straight mark as irregular in height as the crooked line; then, suddenly, she broke off, skipped an inch, and drew a high firm object that looked not unlike a barred gate.

"What on earth are you doing?" asked Gita curiously.

"Outlining your life as I imagine it—in a hazy sort of way. It has never followed the even course of other girls of your class or you wouldn't be what you are. These upward curves and straight marks represent abrupt changes and milestones. But that"—she pointed to the last figure—"is more than a milestone. It represents a barrier that shuts you off completely from your old life.

It opened wide enough to let you through but it is closed and sealed forever. You could not go back if you wished, and I know that you wish nothing less. Behind that barrier is a life you hate to remember. Before it, where you find yourself now, are the pleasant places and all the most romantic girl could have wished for, who was not too extravagant. Position, freedom, an independent income, powerful and admiring friends, and the chance to be stared at as an authentic beauty. Don't you think you should change with it? If you don't you're not as original as you look. Why! You'd be merely commonplace, obstinate, content to go on being one thing all your life. Don't you know that the really intelligent woman these days crowds as much variety into her life as life will permit? And adds as many sides to her personality?"

"Ah!" Gita had turned pale. Her mouth was open and her nostrils dilating, as if her heart were beating irregularly. "That is something I never thought of. I do like change, and maybe I am obstinate—but I'm not commonplace! . . . Perhaps the time *has* come . . . anyhow I promised my grandmother I'd let Mrs. Pleyden bring me out, and dress like other girls. She was dying and had been very generous with me, and I couldn't help promising her. But she died a day or two later and I hadn't thought of it since. But of course I'll have to keep my promise—and I might as well begin now of my own free will," she added characteristically. "And if I really can't look like a boy, what's the use? I suppose I'm too old for such nonsense anyhow. I used to feel a lot older than I do now—and looked it, I imagine." She shot an almost apologetic glance at Elsie, who was beaming: she knew she had succeeded where others had failed. "Reaction, I suppose, and I really never wore such an

ugly hat before. . . . But I won't—and this is positive!—ever marry, or even dance with men."

"Oh, let the future take care of itself. I can think of nothing now but of helping you buy frocks and hats in the New York shops. I know them all—just where to go. Luckily the hat of the moment comes almost to the bridge of the nose, and by the time fashion changes, your front and side hair will have grown out. I'll ask for my vacation now if you'll really start in right away to fit yourself out."

"I will. And send the bills to Mr. Donald! Although he's rather a dear and sent me a check for two-fifty the other day. I've spent hardly any of it. Come upstairs and see the jewels my grandmother gave me. I suppose I'll have to be forty before I can wear most of them, but it's jolly to have inherited lovely things to look at—although I'd forgotten them till this minute!"

CHAPTER IX

Gita, for the first time since her childhood, possessed a completely feminine wardrobe. Mrs. Brewster had set her face against even the most girlish and apotheosized of tailored suits, and persuaded Gita to buy a soft black frock of unbroken lines, to which were attached white linen cuffs above the half-sleeves, and a long white collar about the sloping neck; the opening, after furious controversy, displayed the lace of a camisole. Little frocks for the morning, suitably if austerely embellished. A soft silk hat pulled down over the ears, but with an ascending brim that revealed sleek sweeping eyebrows, and a tri-cornered one of straw. Two dinner-gowns, one of satin and one of georgette. Peach-bloom underwear, silk stockings, slippers, uncompromisingly feminine shoes. Mr. Donald paid the bills with a sigh of relief. What had brought his difficult client to her senses he knew not but drew the natural inference. He hoped the man was the right sort and would hasten to relieve him of an onerous responsibility. If he were not he would do his duty and remonstrate, but the girl was over age; and no one could blame him if she showed as poor judgment in husbands as she did in other things. She was the only young woman of his acquaintance who inspired in him no fatherly sentiments whatever. She reminded him of a prancing colt with a vicious pull on the bit, and he had been moved to wish that she were one and he could give her a taste of the whip.

He made subtle inquiries and learned that she lunched

in Chelsea or Ventnor occasionally, and that she was more frequently in the society of Elsie Brewster, at which he frowned. Still, Mrs. Brewster was a steady-going young woman, as feminine as Polly Pleyden, and a good deal more respectable. And of course she was a lady—according to middle-class American standards—although the family had never aspired to social eminence and were not even Episcopalians. But the mother came of respectable Atlantic City stock (out of New England), and although Mr. Pelham had been in trade (hardware), like his father before him, he had been an educated man, a fine citizen, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce. Elsie had graduated with honors from the High School, and was now considered one of the rising young business women of Atlantic City. She had the respect and admiration of everyone. Still, Mr. Donald knew that Mrs. Carteret would not have permitted the intimacy, and he frowned in sympathy. He knew better than to remonstrate with Gita, however. All he longed for in that quarter was peace and quiet. Democracy was the rage among the young fools anyway.

Elsie, who prided herself justly upon being a psychologist, had insisted that Gita abandon pajamas and buy at least six nightgowns of fine cambric, delicately embroidered and trimmed with lace. Gita had protested, as she had done steadily throughout the entire program—although, being honest, she wondered if it were not for the pleasure of yielding, not merely the angry mutterings of outraged habit—but had jerked her shoulders finally and growled: "Have your own way, but I'll feel like a fool. Lots of the girls wear pajamas." "Yes, but they offend my artistic sense. I'd as soon arrange roses in my best bowl with weeds instead of maidenhair."

She had also wrung from Gita a promise to give her

old clothes "from the skin out" to one of Mrs. Pelham's charities, and shuddered when she found in the trunk Gita fetched in a taxi a plentiful supply of B.V.D's.

"You *are* thorough!" she exclaimed. "I only hope you'll keep it up. Mind, you are to dress every night for dinner, as your grandmother wished, and you are to look at yourself approvingly in the glass later when you've on one of those nightgowns."

But Gita felt bewildered and at times almost unhappy. She opened the doors of the mahogany wardrobe, which had sheltered so many changes of fashion, and fingered the soft texture of her gowns, and felt a thrill of pleasure in their flowing lovely lines. She folded and refolded the dainty contents of the drawers of the oaken carved highboy, as old as the manor, which still smelled faintly of lavender. She put on one of her white linen frocks in the morning and adjusted the black accessories with conscientious precision, or looked admiringly at her reflection in the "psyche mirror," clad in white skirt and black silk sweater. She dressed for dinner in the black georgette, and shot a fleeting glance at herself when robed more simply but more elaborately for the night. Her hair, encouraged by violent brushing and a tonic, was springing out all over her head with an exultant life of its own.

But she was suffering from spiritual growing-pains, and felt as if she were learning to use a new and unclassified set of muscles and nerve arcs. There was a more superficial readjustment as well, for she found silk "queer" after B.V.D's. and fancied it scratched her. The high-heeled slippers hurt her feet, and she was trying to limber her spine and cultivate the careless grace of other girls, although she had no intention of looking as if she were too weak to stand up straight. Elsie was erect

without rigidity, and of course she could get the hang of the thing if she tried hard enough.

She also felt considerable resentment at the approving glances and mutters of Topper (who knew when he was beaten; moreover, had succumbed to the culinary graces of the new cook), and the staccato applause of Polly Pleyden. But this, she ruthlessly informed herself, was egoistical resentment at the intimation that she had been sadly in need of improvement.

But for six years she had thought herself into the rôle of a boy, even pecked her mother on the cheek like a boy, and, in their worst moments, reassured Millicent with bluff crisp phrases instead of the usual feminine endearments; to the end she had scorned sentiment and demonstrations, and, to the amazement and disapproval of Mrs. Melrose, had not shed a tear at the sad little funeral on the desert. "Boys do cry, you know," the kind but exasperated lady had observed, while indulging freely in tears for the friend of her youth. "If you will play a part why not be consistent about it?" But Gita, who was wishing herself in the grave with her mother, had merely looked straight ahead, with the expression, Mrs. Melrose told Ann later, of a wooden Indian.

She had been furious with herself more than once for her secret pride in her eyelashes and had considered mutilation, but after various specious excuses: the breaking of her mother's heart, their value as a sun-screen, etc., she had finally admitted she would as readily cut off her nose. Once, when she caught herself examining her fine Carteret profile with the aid of a hand-mirror, she had thrown the glass out of the window and filched from her father's vocabulary.

It had been a matter of will induced by a special neurosis, but the accomplishment had stopped just short

of perfection, and the effort to make herself over into a girl with a girl's easy grace of carriage and mental lineaments, made her feel bruised all over. It would have been almost as easy for a cripple to stand erect and run a race. She was not only disoriented but apprehensive. Her semi-masculine garb and mental posturing had been like a protective armor, absurd, perhaps, but inspiring her with security and confidence.

Now she felt, she grumbled to herself, like a knight whose armor had been ripped off by the enemy, a turtle that had lost its shell, a bandit who had gone out to hold up a train and discovered he had left his "guns" at home.

But—there was no denying it!—having deliberately let down the bars and made a bonfire of them, her vanity was acting like a hungry bear after a long winter's sleep. It surged over her in singing waves as she regarded herself in the long mirror when arrayed for dinner in one of the soft clinging frocks that revealed arms and the upper part of a neck (Elsie scowled at models high in front and bare to the waist behind) that, however thin, were round and smooth and of the tint of old ivory. She smiled with lips very red and sharply curved, that had been reclaimed (under Elsie's orders) from their perverse hard line; at her bright black eyes with their curved lids and lashes that under artificial light were reflected in the clear light olive and red of her cheeks; at the sweep of her eyebrows and the slender firmness of her throat.

And then she would fall into a panic and feel an impulse to crawl under the bed.

The morning following her first surrender to sheer femininity at the psyche mirror and its almost terrified reaction she hired a horse on the beach and spent two

hours galloping over the sands. Here, at least, she could wear a manlike coat, and breeches, and ride astride.

Of all this she never spoke to Elsie Brewster, and if the agile mind of her mentor darted close to the truth, that wise young woman was content with her large measure of success and, if only out of delicacy and loyalty, probed no further.

She gave Gita all the time she could spare, dined with her frequently, encouraged her to come to the office on Atlantic Avenue, and took her on several buying expeditions to Philadelphia and New York. She sometimes felt like a sculptor with a promising but singularly uncertain piece of clay in his hands: clay with unmalleable lumps and responsive but slippery surfaces.

Gita was kicking off a slipper from an aching foot one night, when her leg was arrested in mid-air. Something had been tapping at her conscious plane for several weeks, an elusive something, gone before she could rake it to the light. Now it darted forward of its own accord, and it seemed to her that an actual entity took form in her brain, smiling significantly.

For years she had had the same dream, and nearly every night. She had stood alone on a solitary mountain-peak, with barely a glimpse of the world below. The figure had been as aloof, as isolated, as the mountain itself. And it was always staring up at another peak, higher still.

She realized that she had not had that dream for a month.

"Well, much good may it do me," she thought, as she kicked off the other slipper. "Coming down to brass tacks and liking them is all very well, but I still wish I had been a man."

And then, standing before the mirror arrayed in the daintiest of her nightgowns, she wondered if she did.

She shrugged her shoulders, climbed into her ancestral four-poster and turned off the light by the bed. "Anyhow, I was born a philosopher," she thought sincerely if erroneously, "and perhaps when I can afford a human bed I'll feel more like the real thing. I might put bows on the corners."

CHAPTER X

GITA, who was on her knees in the garden planting carnations, her favorite flower, but keeping one eye on Andrew and the new gardener, prepared to act summarily at any sign of violence on the old man's part, turned her head as she heard a taxi rattle up the avenue. Then she sprang to her feet and ran toward the house. Her morning visitor was Elsie Brewster.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked anxiously. It was only ten o'clock and Elsie had never accepted an invitation to luncheon. No man in Atlantic City was more sternly devoted to business between the hours of nine and five than the capable Mrs. Brewster.

Elsie's face, usually as placid as the pool in the woods, was flushed a bright pink and her eyes sparkled with excitement. "Something wonderful has happened!" she exclaimed. "And I had to come over and tell you at once."

"Don't tell me you're being sent to Europe!" Gita had a sensation of blank dismay at the prospect of separation from this resourceful and interesting friend, the only one whose constant companionship she had ever craved.

"That wouldn't excite me the least little bit. But don't try to guess. I'll tell you. Come into the library where it's cool."

Gita ripped off her gauntlets and threw them on the floor of the hall. Her broad-brimmed hat followed a yard farther on. "What on earth can it be?" she demanded impatiently. "Don't tell me you're engaged." She glared

at Elsie, who had removed her hat and thrown herself into one of the deep chairs by the window.

"No, no, my child, it's not that or I shouldn't have dared to face you. I'd have prepared the way by a note——"

"Well! What is it? What is it?"

"Did I ever tell you that I have a brother? I've hardly dared mention the word man in your presence."

"Your mother once said something about a son out West, somewhere or other, and of course I assumed that those snap-shots all over the house of a young man in khaki were his. Not bad-looking as men go. Has he struck it rich?"

"I shall begin at the beginning." Elsie had labored too long at craftsmanship to tell a story haphazardly. "You know, his medical course was interrupted by the war, and when he came home he returned to Columbia to finish. He hated to have me work, but mother's income had diminished like that of everyone else, and he knew he could do far better by us later if he had a profession than if he chucked it and took a job with little or no future in it. Besides, he was always mad on the subject of surgery. He used to dissect rabbits in the back yard when he was eight, and when he was ten the cook broke her arm and he had it in splints before the doctor got there. Then, too, he had a lot of experience in the army, where he was always in attendance on some one of the surgeons. He got the Croix de Guerre for operating under fire when the surgeon in charge of the hospital had been killed, and then coolly loading the patients into an ambulance and driving it off as the Germans rushed the town. Well, he graduated about two years ago and went to Butte, Montana, with a fellow graduate—a doctor of medicine —whose father was in charge of a hospital there and

had offered him the position of assistant surgeon. He hated to leave New York, to say nothing of us, but he felt that was not a chance to be missed. Well, there he was, pegging away, when what do you think happened?"

"How on earth should I know?" asked Gita crossly. "Do come to the point. I always read the last page of a story first, and you might have given me the climax as a starter and told me his biography later. I suppose he married a rich patient."

"Not he. He's worked too hard and he's too much in love with his profession to have a thought to spare for women. No. A great surgeon, one of the greatest in New York, Dr. Gaunt, under whom he had served for a time in France, was visiting the hospital and saw him perform an operation on a miner who had been smashed up in a fashion more complicated than usual. Dr. Gaunt was not only much impressed but remembered he had thought Geoff uncommonly clever and resourceful when they had worked together in one of the base hospitals. He needed a young assistant, as the one he'd had for some time had developed incipient tuberculosis and gone to California. He asked Geoff to dinner that night, talked with him for four hours, and then invited him to go to New York. Of course Geoff clinched then and there. When he descended on us this morning and told us the story he said he still felt in a sort of daze. And of course it means a good income from the beginning. Dr. Gaunt will pay him a salary until he is assured of stepping into the personal practice of the former associate, and he is practically certain of that."

"Fine," said Gita temperately. "But I thought he had discovered a gold-mine at least."

"Old stuff. I shouldn't have liked that at all. But

I wish you'd warm up. Don't you see what it means to me?"

"Oh!" Gita sprang to her feet with a little squeal of delight. "Of course! It means you won't have to work any more and can devote all your time to writing." She did not kiss Elsie as another girl would have done, but seized her hand and pumped it up and down. "Now I am excited. It's too wonderful."

"That's it, my dear. After I had got over being exultant for Geoff and he had told me to go straight to the store and hand in my resignation, I'm bound to say I forgot him and was filled with an entirely personal excitement. I never felt so happy in my life."

"I should think so. I know what it is to be free."

She looked at Elsie's flushed face and sparkling eyes and wondered if the young author had what was known as temperament and had been severely repressing it. She was as curious about the secret places of the ego as Elsie herself. "I suppose you'll give yourself up to an orgy of writing now," she said. "Get to work on that novel and be famous this time next year?"

"I'll write it anyhow. Oh!" Elsie sprang to her feet and lifted her arms. The color left her face and it glowed with a white radiance. "Oh! To know that I may have a career! A career! Whether you fail or set the world on fire cannot make so very much difference if only you have the opportunity to try for it, to work for it, to think of nothing else! And to be able to write constantly without interruption. You cannot imagine what it means."

"Yes, I can," said Gita sharply. "And it makes me feel like ten cents. I went to work in the garden this morning because I had nothing to do. I'm sick of the Boardwalk, and I can't read all day."

Elsie came down from the empyrean and regarded her charge anxiously. "You're not getting bored? You!"

"Well, who wouldn't be, in this house all alone? I think I'd have enjoyed it if you and Polly hadn't put a lot of ideas into my head, for then I'd have been full of my new independence and freedom from sordid worries, and I always wanted to put in a lot of reading——"

"Why, you ungrateful little beast! I could shake you."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have said that, and of course that wouldn't have lasted either. And of course I understand myself. I used to get a lot of gratification out of brooding and glooming. No doubt it's that I miss."

"Well! As long as you are honest with yourself you won't come to much harm. But you'd have ended by being a sulky old maid—or worse. Stable endocrines can be unbalanced in time. But I should think your hours would be pretty well filled. You have this house to run, you ride, walk, swim, read, and see a good deal of your friends. Later, New York will be furiously interesting. I really don't see what you have to complain of."

"Well, what does it all lead to? It's all very well for you to be in love with life and dance about and spread your wings. You've a gift, and a career in prospect—full of variety and suspense. The truth of the matter is, I suppose, that my nature craves drama. In a way I've had it all my life. Damn ugly drama, most of it. But with all sorts of climaxes and uncertainties, and a tremendous amount of personal effort and strife. D'you think I'm cut out for a society woman, a lady of the manor? Just about as much as I'm cut out for a husband and babies. Just about!"

"But, Gita! Surely you are enjoying this new life of

yours? And you do fit it, and you do manage to get a great deal out of it."

"Oh, yes, that's true enough. I only go off at a tangent once in a while. But, you see, I've done hard thinking all my life, and I simply can't help wondering every now and again what I'll do when the novelty has entirely worn off and I'm bored stiff. I'm not really bored yet. Just looking ahead."

"Well, just remind yourself that you are now in a position to command a good deal of novelty. This is only the prologue. Life takes care of the changes when one is free on the surface, not burrowing in one of the ruts. Even then things have been known to happen. Of course you'll never fall in love (something she was not at all sure of; but she was wiser than Polly who had "trotted out" three young men for Gita's inspection, and been "treated like a dog" for her pains), so you'll probably miss the most exciting experience of all. But LIFE, when you are fairly launched in it! Oh, wait, my dear! Just wait!"

Gita shrugged her shoulders. "I'm waiting! All you say sounds very fine but it's just glittering generalities. However—I *am* ungrateful and I'll think no more about it. You'll stay to lunch?"

But Elsie rose and put on her hat. "Not today. Tomorrow, if you'll have me. But this is Geoff's first day at home in over a year. I wish you'd dine with us tonight. Can't you forget that Geoff is a man and merely think of him as my brother? After all, when you come out you'll have to meet endless men, and talk to them, too."

Gita gave her a hard stare. "If I thought——"

"Oh, no!" Elsie gave her rippling laugh. "I'm no matchmaker, and if I were you'd be the last person on

earth whose love-destiny I'd dare have a hand in. I'm not sure you'll even tolerate Geoff because he's my brother. I don't know what he may have done in his off moments but I do know that women don't interest him and he makes no effort to talk to them. He's rather silent, even with us. Carving up someone in his mind, I suppose. But I'd like to have you meet him, simply because he is my brother, and you, my dear, have become a part of my life."

Gita kissed her for the first time. It was a peck, but it meant as much, Elsie knew, as the remark that followed. "I'll come, of course, and I'll try not to hate him."

CHAPTER XI

Elsie had never been able to refurnish her old house, but she could have pink lights in the dining-room, and a bowl of pink roses on the table to draw attention from the worn linen and serviceable plates. Colored servants had long since relieved Mrs. Pelham of the "fine china" and Bohemian glass of palmier days. The simple platters and vegetable-dishes were of indestructible silver and she polished them herself.

Gita, whose table was overloaded with massive silver, fit only for a banquet hall, and who had dropped one of the forks on a priceless dish, the fragments removed by a muttering Topper, felt a sharp pang of homesickness: she was reminded of her mother's pathetic attempts to give beauty to the homeliest surroundings, if the result were but a bowl of wild flowers or a worn but embroidered kimono thrown over the bald sofa of a pension.

There was a third at the table, for Geoffrey Pelham had met a friend on the Boardwalk and brought him home. Neither of the men wore evening clothes, but Mrs. Pelham, whose austere face shone with a light that seemed to Gita nothing less than miraculous, wore her best black satin (by no means the soft and clinging fabric of fashion), bordered at the neck and wrists with Irish lace. Elsie's gown of "Caribbean blue" deepened the hue of her eyes, and the revealed pedestal of her neck gave her head and neck a more girlish beauty. She looked barely twenty and her cheeks were very pink, her eyes very

bright. Gita, acutely conscious of her own bare neck and arms, with a rosy glow on their ivory surfaces, tried to concentrate her mind on the excellent food, and answered in monosyllables the occasional remarks addressed to her. It was the first dinner she had attended for over three years, and in San Francisco she had persisted, despite Millicent's tears, in wearing uncomely little dark frocks with elbow-sleeves and a neck curve that fitted the base of her throat.

The conversational ball rolled between Elsie Brewster and Eustace Bylant. Mrs. Pelham merely beamed on her son, who devoted himself to his dinner and rarely volunteered a remark. Gita, who was appreciative of good looks, however grudgingly she might admit their waste, and whose eyelashes were an effective screen for subtle observation, remarked that Geoffrey Pelham had the hard outlines of his mother redeemed by a keen intellectual life of their own, and a high head with an abundance of fair hair, properly cut at the back but indifferently brushed. His eyes, like Elsie's, were gray-blue but darker, widely and deeply set; and he showed his battle with fortune, his ambition, and his devotion to his chosen science in a certain set grimness of mouth and nostril. His tall figure had the look of recent affinity with a uniform, an expression even doctors brought back from the war. But although Gita inferred he might be found attractive by women if sufficiently responsive, she dismissed this gift as negligible and concentrated her admiration for a moment on his brow. Like his sister's it was high and full and had the same expression of intellectual nobility. Probably no lie, as she'd tested out Elsie. . . . Below the eyebrows the face was that of a man whose natural expression might have been nervous, eager, sensitive, but trained to constant and severe repression. A man of a

single purpose, no doubt of that. Well, surgery could have him.

She turned her eyelashes on Mr. Bylant, who was still talking to Elsie.

Eustace Bylant was a novelist of considerable distinction, thirty-eight in years, and admittedly the bridge across the chasm that divided the "younger generation," which had brought a new if somewhat strident note into American fiction, and the stable group that went its serene way based firmly on the traditions of England. His own base was as firm as England's Gibraltar, but his undiminished curiosity, the activity of his mind, and his genuine interest in current life and thought, enabled him without effort to be as modern as the youngsters. Sometimes more so, for the youngsters were often ingenuously mediæval.

And his religion was art, words his flexible tools; he could create a living picture of dire offensiveness without an offensive word. An inexorable realist, he scorned to introduce beauty where beauty was not, but when forced by the exigencies of the story to create an unclean interior inhabited by persons who declined to wash, he conveyed his meaning so craftily that the reader was uncomfortably aware of an assortment of smells and raucous sounds and ugly images, which he remembered long after dismissing the grease and grime and stenches of less accomplished recorders of life at its worst.

Bylant had never made an effort to repress the mobile play of his features and looked less than his thirty-eight years, in spite of the fact that he was a bright light at sophisticate parties when they did not interfere with his work. His long nose was sharp and investigating, his mouth would have been sensuous but for an almost rigid firmness of the lower lip, and his lively gray eyes sparkled

with tolerance and good-humor. He wore an infinitesimal mustache and a short pointed beard.

He was always meticulously groomed and radiated good health; his large firm hands were as carefully tended as a fastidious woman's, although he was as masculine as Geoffrey Pelham and something of an athlete. Gita, who, in her worst days, had polished her nails, compared the hands of the two men. Dr. Pelham's were long and sensitive and flexible, but no doubt he thought it sufficient to keep them clean and disinfected and wasted no time on a buffer.

Gita had arrived early by request, spent half an hour in Elsie's bedroom, and listened none too patiently to a brief biography of the distinguished guest. "I've not seen so very much of him, considering he's a great friend of my brother," Elsie had rattled on, "but he always calls when he comes to Atlantic City; sometimes drops in on me at the office. And I've met him at a few parties in New York. He's known from the first that I am the occasional Elizabeth Pelham of the magazines. Shortly after my début as 'E. B.' he introduced me to Suzan Forbes, who took me firmly by the hand and steered me into the haven of the Lucy Stone League, where cognominal transitions from father to husband are sternly tabu. Do I look all right?"

Gita had assured her she looked lovely, and they had gone downstairs arm in arm.

Aloof and apparently absorbed in her "Maryland chicken," she wondered apprehensively if Bylant were in love with Elsie and decided he was not. His eyes were merely bright with interest as they discussed current tendencies and sophisticate personalities. He had darted a curious glance at herself once or twice in the parlor, and there had been a sudden glow in his eyes when they were

introduced that made her stiffen her spine—that unfailing thermometer of her moods—but he had favored her with his notice no further.

At this point it occurred to her that she was acting like a "cub." In San Francisco, where she had been invited to dinners by girls who both liked and pitied her, eccentricities were condoned and they had expected no help at her hands. Tonight she was not only the guest of honor but the only other girl present, and—she made a wild dive among the shades of her ancestors—she was Miss Carteret of Carteret Manor. She may have accepted the rôle under protest but accepted it she had, and to behave like a sulky outlaw and cast a shade over the feast would no longer be tolerated. Elsie loved her and if she were disappointed would give no sign, but Gita imagined with a shudder the cold disapproval of Mrs. Pleyden if she sat like a sphinx at her table with a picked man on either side to entertain. She might as well begin now.

She turned to Dr. Pelham and asked a tentative question, imbecile, she admitted, but she hardly could be expected to scintillate.

"Are you glad to be home, to have seen the last of the West?"

Pelham smiled slightly. "Oh, I rather liked Butte."

"Mining town, isn't it?"

"Rather." He was in no mood for small talk, for his mind was full of his suddenly dazzling future, but he recognized that he was host, and if this hitherto agreeably silent guest were suddenly inspired to conversation, it was his duty to humor her. "A very noisy town. There are three shifts, you know, and groups of miners on the street corners at all hours of the day and night. The city never seems to sleep."

"Rather trying for those who want to sleep, I should think."

"Decidedly. But I was generally too tired at night to be kept awake even by the eternally bouncing trucks."

Gita turned to him squarely. She felt no repulsion toward individual men as long as they were impersonal, and Butte roused her curiosity. At the same moment Dr. Pelham was enabled to observe that she had the largest and fiercest black eyes he had ever seen and quite the most remarkable eyelashes. "Please tell me something about Butte," she said eagerly. "I have lived in a good many places but never in a mining town. I always thought I'd like to go to Johannesburg, but I never heard of Butte until today."

"The two cities are said to be much alike." And he launched into a description of the stark hill, once known as Perch of the Devil, for unarguable reasons, where the inhabitants walked over copper-mines a mile in depth and sometimes found outcroppings in their back yards. He was grateful to her for introducing a subject which cost him no effort, and he had been able to see the beauty as well as the smiting ugliness of that ore-scorched region. In winter when the high valley was covered with snow it had a cold loveliness of its own, particularly under the blue dawn of Montana.

That phrase had occurred to him as he walked home before sunrise one morning after a call to The Flat to patch up a woman so severely injured in an amorous dispute that it was impossible to move her. His sentences were brief and unadorned but it seemed to Gita that she had a complete vision of that unique "camp" in the Rocky Mountains with its sinister and unsleeping life underground and its scarred and feverish surface.

"I'll go there some day," she said, and not merely

to be polite. "It would be a new sensation to telephone to New York in a comfortable office a mile underground."

Bylant and Elsie had fallen silent and were listening, the latter with intense approval: Geoffrey was exerting himself to entertain a woman, and Gita was hanging on his words. Then she frowned. *That* would be too obvious. One's darling brother and beloved friend. Old stuff. Wouldn't do, anyhow. What Geoff needed was a good old-fashioned wife to see that he got proper food at regular hours, and soothing and sufficiently intelligent conversation when at home. Whatever else Gita might become she never would be soothing and adaptable. Eustace Bylant might manage her. But the distinguished author had not manifested the slightest interest in this transitional friend of hers.

Then she became aware that while leaning toward Geoffrey, Bylant was covertly watching Gita Carteret. There was a curious expression in his eyes . . . very curious. Not admiration; that would have been natural enough. Not even speculation—more natural still. Not dubiety. Gita, now that she had abandoned a hopeless pose, more especially when she wore soft and luminous satin and a rope of shimmering pearls, did not look in the least like a boy. She was still more handsome than beautiful, perhaps, for there was no trace of softness in her spirited features, and had it not been for her eyelashes she would have resembled too closely the eagle-like countenance of Mrs. Carteret. . . . His eyes had not even their "psychological look," as when he was visibly admiring and inwardly impaling some elated woman. . . . No, it was—it was—Elsie almost lost her breath as the expression in Bylant's eyes deepened to an inner certainty. Expectancy? Hope? She had watched it dawn out of a

stare of keen appraisement, as if his critical faculty were determined to make no mistake.

Then she saw him shrug his shoulders, shift his gaze, and give his full attention to Geoffrey. A few moments later, to his friend's manifest relief, he took over the burden of conversation and talked of old and abandoned mining towns he had seen in Nevada; and told stories both orthodox and unusual, that clung to them. One made even Gita laugh heartily; the tale of a man who had taken refuge in the office of his manager high up and in the side of a mountain still full of silver, which could be approached only by a narrow and precarious flight of steps—from a lady of easy virtue, who, now that he owned much of the mountain, was determined to marry him. While he was smoking a congratulatory pipe his manager, passing the entrance to the eyrie, cried out suddenly: "My God, Jim, she's coming up the ladder with a pistol in one hand and a priest behind her!" And, corralled and at bay, the millionaire had married the lady, dowered her extravagantly, and left her to her own devices. A few years later she had attained a high and haughty position in European Society.

This time Bylant included Gita in the conversation as he did Mrs. Pelham; with equal and charming politeness, and nothing more. She went home with the sense of having had an agreeable and instructive evening, and of enjoying it more than she deserved. Far more important, she had pleased Elsie and was not compelled to anathematize herself as a boor. Topper had been ordered to call for her in a taxi, lest Elsie should insist upon her brother's escort. Dr. Pelham, much relieved, pronounced her a sensible young woman, and looked astonished when his sister went off into a paroxysm of laughter.

CHAPTER XII

GITA was walking in her woods. She had had a canter on the beach and a swim and was full of exultant life. The mood of two mornings earlier was forgotten. It was glorious to be young and free from care and as healthy and lively as a puppy. In these days, thank heaven, the young were consciously young; no one could say they did not appreciate their youth till too late.

She had come into the wood because there was no one to see her if she looked as pagan as she felt, and she loved these beautiful silent pines more than any of her possessions. Occasionally she danced, and kicked the pine-needles and fallen cones about. Elsie had forbidden her to whistle and engrave lines about her mouth, but she answered the trills of the birds with sharp little cries almost as ecstatic. She wondered if she had been a dryad in a former incarnation, or (her self-analytical habit always kept pace with her imagination) if she were merely being young for the first time; she could not recall feeling young even in her childhood. She also wondered if she would ever have been unhappy, even under the shadow of Gerald Carteret, if they had lived in the country. "The Peninsula" below San Francisco had been far too decorated and populous to be real country and the desert was a region set aside for lost souls. But in these pine woods with their brooding but intimate silences, their pungent fragrance, and lovely solitudes, she had a sense of both space and friendliness, of state-

liness and simplicity, vastly different, she imagined, from the mighty forests of California.

And they were hers! She had never taken even Elsie into them. She had a fancy that these straight slender trees had, perhaps a million years ago, lived as men and women, whose souls had passed finally into a form more beautiful than Nature had granted to mortals, and fortunately inarticulate; but that they recognized her as an old playmate and sheltered her jealously when she found her joy in their shade. She picked up a cone and flung it into the arbors above, resenting even the presence of a squirrel in her secret domain, and gave a whoop of delight as he scampered angrily across his branch into another tree.

And then she came face to face with Eustace Bylant.

"You look like a wood-nymph," he said, lifting his hat and undisconcerted by the fierce blaze of her eyes. "For a moment I hesitated to break the spell."

Gita was speechless with amazement and wrath. She felt an impulse to chase him out of her sacred wood as she would a stray cat from her bedroom. Then she remembered her manners and said with bitter politeness: "Good morning. You startled me, but this is the first time I have ever met anyone in my woods."

"Are they yours? I beg your pardon. New Jersey is covered with woods and one gets into the habit of thinking of them—well, as just woods. And I happen to be very fond of woods. But I am really sorry," he added contritely. "You looked so happy a moment ago—happier than any mere mortal has a right to look. . . . And I think I understand. I'll go if you insist——" He broke off and looked about him at the sweet deep aisles of the wood with an expression of longing in his fine eyes that seemed to have eliminated herself.

The spell was broken and the creature was a friend of Elsie's. "Oh, well, as you are here you may as well stay," she said with no attempt at graciousness. "But I must go in presently. I have business letters to write."

"Oh, please! Business letters! What a horrible thought. How could it enter your head in these woods? If they were mine I doubt if I should write a line except when they were dripping in winter: I have a holy horror of rheumatism."

He strolled beside her, his hands in the pockets of his riding-coat, his hat pushed to the back of his head. He had come to the wood deliberately to meet her, casually if possible, and find her off guard, and he had been rewarded by a full glimpse of something he had half suspected two nights ago. She had haunting memories for him and he was determined to study her, possibly to marry her. He smiled to himself as he reflected that the first thought of another man no doubt would be to awaken the womanhood so perversely sleeping in this girl who seemed to be unconscious that sex ruled the world, but he was on a different track. He had extracted something of her history from Elsie Brewster after Gita had left them, and more from Polly Pleyden, with whom he had dined on the following night. But the information had been sought less out of sheer masculine curiosity than as a means for determining his tactics.

"May I smoke?"

Gita nodded sullenly. She had behaved uncommonly well, she told herself, but if he were unable to take a hint nothing further could be expected of her. A man in her woods! Men, individually, were not worth hating as long as they behaved themselves, but her indifference when they did was entire. This creature did not look predatory and his cool impersonal gaze aroused in her

no sense of wary disquiet. She walked straight and silent beside him and he talked of the dinner at the Pleydens'.

"Polly was rather huffed when I told her I had met you at the Pelhams'," he said. "It seems you have refused to dine with her."

"My grandmother has only been dead three months. Polly knows quite well I don't go out. Dining with Elsie is another matter."

"Quite so. But I am delighted to hear that your period of mourning will end in the winter and you will visit the Pleydens in New York." There was no emphasis in his cool quiet tones and he appeared merely to be making conversation. Gita wondered impatiently why he didn't go.

"I suppose I shall have to visit them for a week or two."

"Ah? Mrs. Pleyden said she expected you to spend the winter with them. It seems she had some understanding with your grandmother."

"Oh, no!" Gita's voice sounded such genuine alarm that he glanced about the woods once more with a smile of sympathy.

"I understand," he said softly.

Gita warmed to him for a moment. "If I've got to be introduced to this Eastern Society I've got to, I suppose, but I shall live here and only go to New York occasionally. And I'll not be invited to parties because I don't dance. I don't fancy I'll be run after for dinners either. I wish I were rich enough to have an apartment in town to spend half the week in. I do want to go to the opera and all the new plays. But my lawyer says I must be careful for a year or two."

"Why don't you rent the manor? I fancy there are

a good many of the backgroundless on the lookout for an incongruous setting. They would give you a fancy price."

Gita shook her head vigorously. "I did think of it once but I never could do it now. It's too much mine in too many ways. It seems to have a soul of its own, a distillation of all the Carterets, perhaps. I could as easily have rented out my grandmother."

Bylant laughed heartily. He had a mellow laugh and it struck no false note in the wood. "I have heard a good deal of Mrs. Carteret and I fancy your old manor house would appreciate the compliment. I understand exactly what you mean, for I too have an old house—in Albany —and my mother would not live anywhere else. She insisted that old houses, particularly old family mansions, had a very real and complex personality, made up not only of those who had lived there—the direct inheritors and the diverse strains introduced by marriage—but because the windows, she said, were so many eyes looking out on history in the process of making; the family ghost, perhaps, recording it all in the invisible volumes that atmosphere shares with the subconsciousness of man. An old house must have an atmospheric library as extensive as the British Museum, and could hardly fail to have a personality. My mother—Bladina, I called her, for, although she was the consummate mother, she seemed little older than myself—used to say that if anything could convert her to spiritualism it would be the hope of making her old walls speak; the house was built by a Dutch ancestor when Albany was Fort Orange and she refused to leave it when she married."

Gita was regarding him with interested eyes. "How odd!" she exclaimed. "I've been feeling just like that lately. Been reading a history of New Jersey; and my

old manor must have accumulated tomes. Primeval wilderness and Indians. Dutch—West India Company. Swedes. English. Dutch once more. English again. Constant disputes between governors and between East and West New Jersey before they were reunited. Always on the verge of war with New England. Jealousies, heart-burnings, shattered careers. Governors who oppressed and provoked the people to rebellion, and one who 'dressed himself in a woman's habit and patrolled his fort.' Quakers. Witches. Lords Proprietors. Negro risings, and negro slaves burned alive for assault. Then the American Revolution; there was a good deal of fighting around here. And all the rest. And the Carterets lived a wild life of their own. My baronial hall, as the historian calls it, has an aloof, brooding, almost intolerably self-satisfied air, as if it knew so much more than any mere mortal could ever learn. It is quite haughtily reserved and withdrawn and only condescends to me because I was born a Carteret. But it really makes me feel more at home than I ever felt anywhere else, and I'd starve before I'd have its atmosphere damaged by aliens."

"I understand. I understand—perfectly." He had turned a little pale, but he continued to regard her with eyes that evinced mere friendly interest. And as he had evidently been as devoted to his mother as she to poor Millicent, and as he had without conscious effort made her talk freely, and understood her at that, she decided—particularly as there seemed to be no prospect of getting rid of him—to tolerate him for the morning at least.

"I'm rather tired," she said. "Let's sit down."

They had come to the edge of the pool, an oval sheet of water in the heart of the wood, so densely surrounded

by pines that their branches were reflected in the water and there was hardly room to sit on the turf. She propped herself against a tree and he selected one close by.

"Now," she said, "tell me more of your mother. What did she look like?"

"Very much like you," said Bylant.

CHAPTER XIII

For a moment Gita felt more angry than astonished, and half rose. Then she settled back with a laugh. "Someone's mother is the very last—— Was she any relation of the Carterets?"

"Not that I know of, but types are not confined to families."

"I don't at all like being told I belong to a type."

"But everyone does, my dear child." Bylant smiled indulgently as he took out his pipe. "It is the common lot, although nothing distresses the ego more than to be reminded of it. But it is type accentuated, raised to the nth degree, that makes the individual. You are like my mother in certain respects, in others not at all, and yet you are the only person I have ever met who reminded me of her. If you had been brought up here at Carteret Manor the resemblance would be more striking still, but the plus and the minus make you yourself and no one else. Don't writhe under the apprehension that your exact counterpart exists anywhere else in the world! . . . On the other hand, if the conditions had been reversed, I don't doubt that my mother would have been, at your age, almost precisely what you are today."

Gita had been introduced to a new sensation. Titillated vanity conquered pique. She had heard of the none too subtle methods of the American male and eyed Bylant warily, then concluded he was harmless, and smiled encouragingly. "I suppose, on the whole, I should be flat-

tered," she said. "And your mother seems to have been one of the individuals. How was she brought up?"

"In the most orthodox manner possible. A beautiful high-spirited intelligent girl, she was educated partly in France, partly in New York, and came out inevitably at eighteen. She had a winter of intoxicating belledom and then married my father, who was her complement in looks, being even lighter than I am, had that air of intense reserve that suggests unfathomable depths, and the most charming manners. It was blind surrender to the race-urge with the mental accompaniment of an infant rooting in the proper place for nourishment. All the old-timers are horrified at this new license of young people, but at least they will avoid one mistake of their forerunners. They know exactly what is the matter with them.

"The marriage was not a happy one. My father was dull, stubborn, and had ideas as orthodox as himself on the subject of home rule. He was thrown from his horse and killed when I was seven. After that she devoted herself entirely to me—her parents died soon after she married—and recovered all her old buoyancy and joy of life. Of course she had other offers of marriage, and many friends; but although she liked society and was too sane to hate an entire sex because one man had failed her, she was too happy in her freedom and her child to be tempted for a moment. She entertained enough to give the atmosphere of my home a certain gayety and to initiate me into the ways of the minor world. I went to boarding-school when the proper time came, for she was too wise to run the risk of feminizing me, but I spent my vacations with her—we traveled a good deal —and when I left Harvard and returned home with the intention of adopting the profession of letters, she be-

came my constant companion and spoiled me for anyone else. She had a wide range of interests, in life as well as in books—in which she had taken refuge during my father's régime—and magnificent spirits——"

"Well, those I haven't got, at all events. I've felt blue or cross most of my life."

"I saw you dancing in the woods. You looked sixteen —no, ageless. . . . Your spirits were in constant conflict with your luck and boiled over into the wrong channels. If you had been commonplace your unhappy experience would have made little impression on you."

"Well, it made a lot, and if you care to hear it I'll tell you something about my own mother."

He leaned over and emptied the ashes of his pipe into the lake. When he turned to her his eyes were bright and his cheeks flushed, but his expression betrayed nothing more than kindly interest. "Please do," he said warmly. "One confidence deserves another. I've heard scraps—you are a much-discussed young person, you know—and I'm keen to hear the story at first hand."

"You'll not put me in a book!" There was a very faint note of alarm in her voice, and she experienced another titillation at the possibility.

"If you really do not want to be 'put in a book' you are even more original than you look. But suppose we defer introducing anything so extraneous to the moment as fiction? I certainly should not take such a liberty without your consent after you had given me your confidence. Just now I am only interested in discovering what has made you so different from Bladina."

This subtle touch completed the conquest of Gita's jealous reserve. To her increasing amazement she found herself unburdening her soul of the poisonous accumulations of her twenty-two years. She told the chronicle

from the beginning, omitting no detail, extrinsic or subjective. If she paused to remind herself that she was breaking the habit of a lifetime and turning herself inside out—to a man! Of all things!—she concluded that an author was much the same as a father confessor, but more appreciative of high-lights; she knew that she was telling an interesting story and telling it well.

Bylant, overwhelmingly interested in her both as a man and an ardent psychologist, was quite aware of her attitude toward himself, and although the man in him rebelled, for he was more in love with her every moment, he consoled himself with the pregnant certainty that he was her first confidant; and, whether she resented the act later or not, she was creating an indissoluble bond. It was a long first step and he knew the virtue of patience.

But Gita's indifference to anything below the intellectual dome of her new friend was complete. She felt buoyant and released, as if she had suddenly been hauled out of a dungeon and introduced to light and freedom, and she felt grateful and quite willing to take him on as a doctor. He had certainly purged her soul. To talk about herself after all these years of repression had been almost ecstatic and she knew she had committed the wisest act of her life. But she concluded on a light note.

"There, you've had it all! Not a pretty story, is it? And you must be thankful I'm not your mother."

"If you hadn't been her psychological—and physiological—twin your story would have been very different and you wouldn't have told it."

CHAPTER XIV

GITA glanced at her wrist-watch and sprang to her feet.

"A quarter past one! My old Topper will be wringing his hands. He's served meals on time for fifty years and privately thinks me a disgrace to the Carterets because I hate regular hours and strew my things all over the house. You must come back to lunch with me. I've an excellent cook."

Bylant dusted the pine-needles from his trousers. "I won't be gallant and vow that a luncheon of bread and cheese in your company would be a feast for the gods, for I'm both hungry and highly appreciative of good cooking; and this is a morning sternly devoted to truth. I'll come with the greatest pleasure in the world."

His tone was gay and matter-of-fact, but Gita received the subtle message that super-formalities existed between them no longer. She shrugged her shoulders. Well, she had done the inconceivable. Why not take on a man friend for a change? And an author-man, at least, was far more understanding and stimulating, when it came to real conversation, than any woman she had known.

After luncheon they sat in the library, and for a time in silence, Bylant enjoying his cigar, his eyes roving appreciatively over the walls of books. It was a completely satisfying relic of the past, that old manor library, collected by men who had been intellectual in their own ponderous way; and an inimitable background for this spirited, rebellious, neoteric descendant who had inher-

ited their handsome high-bred shell and cast out their prejudices, packing the space with idiosyncrasies of her own.

Gita followed his glance. "Those old tomes are pretty dull," she said with a sigh. "But I learned something of the history of each of the countries I lived in—France, Belgium, Germany, Italy; we were even in England once for a few months—and it is time I knew more. I'm frightfully ignorant. I like history and biographies better than anything, but I must say it's rather hard to lose oneself in musty pages covered with brown spots like freckles, and long esses. I don't believe a Carteret bought a book later than 1830. But I peg away at it for two hours every evening, and on rainy days I yawn over them by the hour. I've made a virtuous resolution not to read a novel for six months."

"I'll send you some of the modern histories and biographies. They are equally—perhaps more—authentic, and their writers belong to this generation of the quick and are more fearful of dullness than of crime. Dullness is a crime, for that matter, for it has slaughtered more brains than excess."

But he had no intention of discussing books with her. It should be another bond between them in the future and the fertile cause of frequent association; but the mood of the morning was still on her, her intoxicated ego still danced in those magnificent eyes, and he needed little adroitness to lead her to enlarge upon certain incidents of her past which, he protested, she had brushed aside too lightly to satisfy a greedy psychologist. Gita was not slow to understand that she was the most interesting study that had ever swum within the ken of this multifariously experienced novelist, and she rose to the bait.

He also gave her a more detailed account of his own life, particularly before the sudden death of his mother eight years ago; and if, when they finally parted, she did not feel that she knew him better, and he her, than anyone either of them had known in this life of many acquaintances and few friends, it was, he told himself grimly, through no fault of his.

"You'll see me again in a day or two," he said as they shook hands in the garden, whither they had migrated as the sun rode to the west. "I'm going to New York tomorrow to make a choice selection among my books for your delectation. May I bring them over on Friday?"

"Come to lunch if you like. It's been very jolly and I'll always be glad to see you—with or without the books." Gita produced what she called her manor-manners without effort. This author-man had chased away the black clouds that always muttered on the horizon even when they did not overwhelm her and she felt intensely grateful to him. She liked him better than Elsie or Polly and he would be as little likely to make love to her.

He felt an impulse to ask her to meet him in the wood, but decided it would be a failure in tactics, and merely replied:

"I shall take advantage of your hospitality very often. I came to Atlantic City to get rid of a cold and have taken rooms in Chelsea for a month. But the life here has never interested me and I'll look upon you as the best of good fellows if you'll let me come often to this delightful old manor."

"The door is always open, for Topper and I disagree on the subject of fresh air and burglars. As they used to say in California in the old Spanish days, 'The house is yours. Burn it if you will.' "

And they both laughed, and parted, well pleased with themselves.

CHAPTER XV

GITA, who, to use his own word, had pestered Mr. Donald for money to refurnish her house, had announced some time since that she had changed her mind.

"I suppose the house has changed it for me," she thought; she condescended to no explanation to her lawyer, whom she delighted in tormenting. "I've an idea its walls would fall in if I took too many liberties with its sacred traditions."

And now that the more anachronistic of the furnishings had been banished (what-nots, rep sets with antimacassars, walnut writing-desks, hat-racks, marble-topped tables, chiffoniers, commodes, ottomans, Victorian horsehair), and fresh air had exorcised the mustiness she had found so depressing, there was no question that tulipwood and hickory, spindle-legs and mahogany, carved oak and pewter, Sheraton and Windsor, lady-made tapestry, threadbare velvet, brocade and damask, however little they might harmonize one with the other, were as much a part of the historic old mansion as the family portraits; and nothing she could buy in New York or Philadelphia, even if she confined herself to "period" shops, would take their place. Like the walls they had been the mute companions of nearly three centuries of Carterets; and Gita, sitting on one of the faded chairs in the drawing-room, sometimes fancied there was a knowing smile on the lips of her grandmother's portrait, painted shortly after she came to the manor as a bride, and smiled in unwilling response as she remembered one

of her last conversations with the redoubtable old lady. She had surrendered to the house, no doubt of that. She had despised ancestral traditions as long as they had given her nothing, had been a convinced democrat, with leanings toward socialism, as long as she was a quasi-derelict; but now that she possessed an adequate and independent income, inherited from her line with one of the most historic old properties in America, she felt as if she were being reëducated in silent communion with every Carteret that had lived here before her.

There were family portraits all over the lower floor, and their painted unchanging faces had become as familiar to her as those of her lively and excessively modern young friends; she sat in the twilight and tried to visualize that long and vanished line that had contributed to the personality of the house even if their shades did not return to haunt it. She had no fear of ghosts and would have liked to see her Carterets moving about their old habitat in the picturesque costumes of their eras. The only ghost that would have frightened her was her too-recent grandmother's, and if her father had stood before her she would have shrieked her dismay. She sincerely hoped his discarnate self was permanently impaled in a roasting pit.

Oh, the old house had got her! It was remaking her in a way, and at this conclusion she sometimes rebelled. She had looked upon Gita Carteret as a crystallized and unique individuality, and to be reconstructed by a combination of circumstances and ghosts gave her ego some intemperate moments; but finally she reasoned that as everyone was the sum of his ancestors, what she was developing into had really composed the foundations of her being, and was now enjoying its first opportunity to express itself. If she had been brought up at Carteret

Manor, as her grandmother had insinuated, she would have been a Carteret to her still recalcitrant spine.

While drawing these wise conclusions she quite forgot poor Millicent, who, after all, had contributed, both by blood and counsel, a modicum of sweetness and adaptability—to say nothing of good manners when Gita chose to use them. No Carteret had ever been called adaptable or sweet. Their grim handsome hard faces were of men —and women—whom life had favored not chastened, and had bred out less powerful cross-strains necessarily introduced by marriage.

Gita had forgotten Eustace Bylant almost as soon as he had left her; forgot him as promptly after each subsequent visit; or, if he drifted across her memory, it was merely as a sympathetic and instructive mind, whose devotion to his mother had struck a responsive chord, and then delivered her own of its burden. As a man he was non-existent. Although she analyzed herself ruthlessly and as often as occasion demanded, on sex, either in herself or other women, she had never wasted a thought. She might resent being a "female," but as to what it involved aside from its disabilities was no concern of hers. She had read enough to know that some women went through life as frigid as the disembodied, and she concluded, when she thought about the matter at all, that she belonged in their class. Odd if she did not, with her springs poisoned before they had reached the surface. Anyhow, it was one more matter for congratulation and pointed the wings of her freedom.

Polly strolled in on her one day when she was standing before the portrait of her grandmother, whimsically making faces at the intolerant beauty who had harbored no

doubts of HER place in the general scheme, and laughed aloud.

"Why don't you stick your tongue out at her?" she asked. "I often wanted to when I was a kid."

Gita whirled, frowning. "I didn't hear you!"

"Glad you didn't. Caught another glimpse of your innards. Eustace Bylant would express it more stylistically, no doubt. Hear you've been seeing a lot of him lately. What's happened? Thought you'd no use for men."

"He's brought me some books—jolly good ones."

"But he's a man, my dear. A two-legged, upstanding, at least eighty-eight-per-cent man."

"Is he?" asked Gita indifferently. "What has that to do with it? I remember I told you once I'd no objection to talking to intelligent men as long as they behaved themselves."

"Oh, he's a sly old fox, but I'll wager this is the first time he's had to hold in and lay siege. Siege is generally on the other side."

"Don't talk rot. He thinks I need educating, and I certainly do. He might be a forty-per-cent as far as I'm concerned."

Polly looked at her sharply, then laughed. "Poor Eustace! However, life, to say nothing of our own sweet sex, has treated him well. It would take a good deal to discourage him——"

"Don't be a crashing bore. You look lovely. Why don't blondes always wear pale yellow?"

"Like it?" Polly spun on her heel. She wore a woven silk sport suit and untrimmed felt hat of yellow the shade of her hair and looked not unlike a canary. "You'd be wonderful in yellow yourself and I long for the time

when you'll go into colors. I've thought out two gowns for you."

Gita's eyes sparkled and her faint annoyance passed, with all memory of Eustace Bylant. "I feel symptoms of taking a frantic interest in dress and wish I were rich."

"Oh, you've enough. Lots of the girls have to manage. They've got hold of a little dressmaker lately who was with Langdorf and Dana for years and has set up for herself. She'll dress you for hundreds where the old robbers would charge you thousands. And as Mr. Donald is dying to get rid of you he'll not lecture you on extravagance—and that brings me to the object of this morning call. Mother is frightfully upset."

"Is she? What's the matter with her?" Gita was sitting on a low crinoline chair looking up at Polly, who had begun to walk restlessly about the room.

"Have to come out with it, I suppose, as I offered to take on the job. She hates scenes, and as for poor old Donald——"

"Scenes? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Well—she and Mr. Donald had a long pow-wow yesterday, and the upshot was they decided you must have a chaperon-companion—and at once."

"Chaperon? I?" Gita sprang to her feet. "Are you raving?"

"Oh, come now, Gita, you've seen a good deal of the world, first and last. You know perfectly well that girls of our sort don't live alone. Neither mother nor Mr. Donald thought it worth bothering about before, because you were in mourning, and because—well, because you were you. They never for a moment imagined you'd be receiving young men alone."

"I'll not let him come here again. I shouldn't care if I never saw him again."

"Poor Eustace! But the harm's done, my dear. All Chelsea is buzzing——"

"Your crowd, you mean! They're nice ones to talk. I thought they'd forgotten the meaning of the word chaperon."

"Ah, but we'd never live alone, my dear. To be really free you must observe certain conventions just as you must wear the proper clothes. Keep your background intact and you may kick your slipper over the moon. Think of all the rascality men get away with so long as they keep within the law. Same idea. We'll have to find a respectable companion for you——"

"No, you will not! I love living alone and doing just as I please. And no companion would stay with me a week, I'll tell you."

"Oh, she'd have a sweet time of it, no doubt of that. But, Gita, remember you're coming out next winter——"

"I'll settle that right here. If I have to choose between your stupid old Society and my complete independence I won't come out. I could get a lot more out of New York, anyhow, by myself, and if I want to know people Elsie will take me among the sophisticates. You know perfectly well I'd be a failure in Society, anyhow."

Polly was dismayed. She had watched the evolution of Gita with satisfaction and mirth, and was convinced that when she had shed the last of her bristles she would be a regular girl; not quite like anyone else, perhaps, but amenable. But this was taking freedom altogether too seriously. She gathered her forces and she was a hardy antagonist.

"Know what will happen?" she demanded, seating herself and lighting a cigarette. "The men of that sophis-

ticate crowd will feel they can insult you with impunity. Pretty mixed crowd; not all gentlemen, not by a long sight. I've sneaked out and gone to several of their parties with Eustace. They don't drink any more than we do, for they couldn't, but our boys, rotten as they are, know how to treat us—have the same code—and some of those men, let me tell you, do not; when they're lit, at all events. And, as you don't write, or anything of that sort, they'd assume you were a blasée rich girl out for larks. You're a beauty in your own fierce way, and they'd paw you till you were sick. Neither Eustace nor Elsie could protect you——"

"Shut up! Shut up!" Gita stamped her foot. Her black brows were an unbroken line and her eyes shooting sparks. "Don't you suppose I know how to take care of myself? I've had enough experience, God knows. I'm not afraid of sophisticates; they're probably babies beside European men, and if they were as bad as you make them out, which they probably are not, I'd keep them in their place. I haven't been to any of your parties, but I've met men at your house and I wouldn't put anything past them——"

"Right, right, my dear. But you're not their sort—not yet at all events. Men have to be met half-way, these days. They won't bother you——"

"You just said those other men were not my sort either."

"More so, for they have brains. They'd go crazy over you because you suggest sex, all right, even if you haven't any, and sex is their main preoccupation. You'll be safe with us, my dear—and nowhere else."

She had played her first strong card and was wise enough to break off and open her vanity-box, while Gita

strode over to the window and stared moodily at the calm old oak on the lawn.

"I needn't go into that crowd either." Gita broke the silence after Polly had powdered her nose and lit another cigarette.

"Oh? Sure? You forget you've learned what companionship means, and I doubt if you could do without it. Eustace must have taught that hungry mind of yours a few things. Hasn't he?"

"Well, according to your own account, I'd not find any of his sort in your set."

"But I have a plan, if you'll sit down and look at me. A real inspiration. Eustace is the only man I happen to know in that crowd; he's a second or third cousin and mother used to visit his mother in Albany. I'll take him on as a partner to make our house interesting to you. He'll bring as many of his friends to us as he thinks worthy the honor of meeting you, and will give parties at his rooms, hand-picked. That way you'll have the cream of both worlds and can enjoy yourself without wondering what will come next. I shan't object a bit, myself, for novelty is the only thing to live for; and as for mother, she adores Eustace and wouldn't mind a bit if I married him——"

"Why don't you? You intend to marry some day and I should think he'd be more tolerable than most. He's a gentleman, has plenty of money, and an occupation that would keep him out of your way most of the time."

"I believe in mixed colors if not in mixed races. A brunette for mine. Not dark enough to be greasy, but a nice pale brown or olive. A man as blond as I am would make my skin crawl. Now, if you were to marry Eustace that would settle our problem nicely."

Gita deigned no answer.

"Not for a year or two, really. I want you to find out what it is to be a girl first. But isn't mine the perfect plan?"

"It sounds better than it may work out."

"It appeals to you and you can't deny it. And that brings us back to the main point. You must have a companion."

"That I won't."

"Your voice has lost its emphasis. You know that you must. There's an aunt of mother's, poor but proud, who's living on a dog's income. She's a perfect lady, wears caps, and takes nice little mincing steps——"

"Good lord!"

"Well, how about Mrs. Brewster?" She tightened the corners of her lips as Gita dropped into a chair and stared at her.

"Elsie! What an idea!"

"Fine idea. She would do for the rest of the year, and you're coming to us in January."

"Elsie? She's about the only person I could live with."

"Quite so. Think it over."

"But—if she'd come."

"She will when I put it up to her. I've only met her twice; once here, and the other night at a dinner Eustace gave, but she made me wish I knew her better. I'd like an excuse to call on her and if you say the word I'll tackle her today."

"She can't work anywhere but in her study."

"That's the way Eustace talks. Sounds to me like bally rot, as our English friends say, but I suppose your geniuses know their own business. Anyhow, she could write at home and spend the rest of her time here. That

mother of hers wouldn't miss anybody, from all accounts."

"Well—if Elsie'll come I'll have her; but no one else, mind you. And you mustn't call on her in the morning. She doesn't let anyone disturb her."

"Then I'll stay to lunch and see to it you don't change your mind."

CHAPTER XVI

ELSIE, after a long and sweeping talk with Polly Pleyden, accepted the invitation. Both agreed that Eustace Bylant was the husband for Gita—eventually. And, as it was out of the question for her to live alone any longer, Elsie was the one to clear his path.

"Not that I'll say a word to her," said the young author, whose brows still betrayed perplexity. "I told her once I'd never dare meddle with her sex-stream, and I meant it. But if she can fall in love with Eustace it would be an ideal marriage for her. He's everything she is not, and yet the differences are not the sort that antagonize, but complement. And he's just the *guide* she needs—in every way. An impetuous passionate man would repel her from the start. I've seen them together once or twice, and I got the impression of a subtle bond between them, quite aside from books, or master and pupil, although, so far, of course, Gita regards him merely as a walking intelligence."

"Oh, let him do the job," said Polly lightly. "You just stick round and play long-distance propriety. But if he says anything to you, tell him to go slow. I want to see first what Gita's like when she's racketing round with us. . . . But I don't fancy he'll rush her. Knows that patience is his long suit. If he loses his head some moonlight night—well! I'd like to be there to see the explosion. He'd probably find himself sitting on the roof. But I fancy he'll watch out. Must make himself as indispensable and familiar as the old furniture and Top-

per. And then sort of propose without actually proposing. Get my idea?"

"Oh, yes, I get it!" Elsie gave a faint sigh of envy. This radiant assured young person had evidently never met defeat in her life. But she was the more ready to assist in the achieving of Miss Pleyden's latest whim because on the only two occasions she had seen her brother since the dinner he had asked abruptly after Gita. He had frowned as if annoyed with himself, no doubt recalling his characteristic remark after he had handed her over to Topper. Probably those black eyes of Gita's had been haunting him! She could conceive of no bond between those two and was determined they should not meet again if she could prevent it. No doubt Bylant would succeed in his suit before Gita went to New York for the winter. If she knew anything of men he was the sort whose enforced patience would come to an abrupt end when he had accomplished his purpose, and he would marry her at once. But she sighed again. She had had her day-dreams. . . .

She moved over to the manor next day, and, as her novel was hanging fire, she determined to make an experiment. "I know at least one novelist," she told Gita, "who writes every new book in a new place. Finds that surroundings dissociated from habit stimulate the imagination. So, if you will give me a quiet corner——"

Gita, delighted, gave her a room off the library that had been used as an office by her grandfather, and the experiment was a success. The social gods were placated, Elsie wrote from six until noon, while Gita either amused herself alone, or rode, walked, talked with Eustace Bylant; who was the most complacent of the trio. He never deluded himself that he had struck a spark from his own steady flame, but she depended on him increas-

ingly, she did not wince, at least, if he touched her hand, or shoulder, as they bent together over a book, and he had the field to himself. He knew Polly's plans but had no intention of considering them. He still had four months, for the Pleydens did not move to New York until January, and he was determined to marry Gita as soon as he had worn down her defenses.

They were strolling on the Boardwalk one Sunday morning after what was known as the "summer crowd"—drawn from every state in the Union—had taken possession of Atlantic City, and commenting on the lack of feminine beauty in the American masses after the mere prettiness of youth had surrendered to an utterly commonplace maturity.

"No wonder the girls come here in the hope of picking up a husband," said Bylant. "This has always been a great marriage-mart, even in the days when visitors were practically all of one class. Now the opportunities are more casual, but in the big hotels there is dancing every night, girls are bound to meet men, and the number of engagements that come off every year in Atlantic City makes it the goal of all mothers with young daughters, whose social circle is narrow and mainly composed of women."

He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Gita, who shrugged indifferently.

"Don't your fellow mortals interest you in the least?" he asked.

"Rather."

"But not the question of marriage?"

"Not a bit."

"But would you like to think that all these pretty girls could never find a mate—and fulfil their destiny?"

"I always hope women will get everything they want,

and if they are silly enough to want husbands, let 'em have 'em by all means."

"But my dear Gita, is it possible you don't realize that woman's one chance of authentic happiness lies in love and mating?"

"I know they think it does—because they've been fed on traditions and are the slaves of custom. They'd be a long sight better off by themselves. Love is nothing but a cherished superstition."

"Oh, no, it is not! It's the deepest and most inalienable of human instincts."

"Instinct is nothing but memory."

"Possibly. We'll call it by another term. Imperative impulse. And the sex-impulse has its birth in the generative cells. It has nothing to do with tradition."

"I know that well enough. But you were talking of love. What has that to do with sex cells?"

"Well! More than you seem to imagine. Do you really believe that love between men and women can exist independently of sex?"

"Of course. Look at me. I love you even more than I do Elsie or Polly, and you might wear a one-piece dress for all the difference it would make."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Bylant, pardonably exasperated, almost struck a child in the face with his stick. "As it happens I don't wear petticoats——"

"We don't either. Bloomers."

"Oh, you are impossible!" But he was forced to laugh. He made his voice gay and challenging. "Suppose I should fall in love with you?"

"I don't see you falling in love with anybody."

"You don't?"

"I've seen too much of men. They're divided into

three classes: beasts, fools, and intellectuals. You belong to the last and have a great gift besides. You've got something better to do than being an abject slave of the race—for that is what it amounts to—and your emotions are all in your head."

"And that represents your considered observation of intellectuals! Or are you the average American whose creed is: 'Things are what I want them to be, not what they are'?"

"Of course not," said Gita crossly. "I wouldn't recognize the beastliness and stupidity of human nature and of life if I were. But you are as cold-blooded as a codfish and I shouldn't like you if you were not."

Bylant nearly strangled as he passed over the diagnosis. "Like? You said just now you loved me."

"Love only means preference raised a degree higher. Stop arguing on such a silly subject, Eustace. What's come over you? This is the first time we've argued that I haven't learned something."

"Well, I've taught you nothing on one subject, that's flat. I merely wanted to sound you out on a topic of somewhat general preoccupation. Your ideas always interest me and you've been singularly illuminating this morning. Here's a tearoom. Shall we go in and have a cup? It's two hours until luncheon."

CHAPTER XVII

GITA had an old habit of reviewing the day as she prepared herself for the night. She and Elsie parted at nine o'clock, for both rose early, and as Gita kicked off her slippers that evening she recalled her conversation with Eustace on the Boardwalk.

She had been by no means as obtuse as she had appeared, for love and marriage were subjects never broached by him before and her keen ear had detected a personal vibration in his even mellow voice. But he had talked lightly or brilliantly on strictly impersonal topics during the rest of the morning, they had lunched at the Pleydens', and played tennis all afternoon; she had not given that conversation another thought until she was alone in her room.

She seized her military brushes and excoriated her scalp.

"Now, what on earth was he driving at?" she demanded of her frowning reflection in the mirror. "Does he want to marry me? Sounding me out? Well, I hope he's satisfied. Eustace! *What* a bore. . . . Or am I to be the heroine of his next novel? More likely."

She dropped the brushes and fell to pondering. After all, she might have expected it. He was not in love with her—how could he be, sexless intellect that he so marvelously was?—but he had spent the best part of every day with her, taking an indisputable pleasure in her society (and she knew from Polly that his interest in other women had been casual); no doubt he would like to take her on as a permanent companion. She knew that

she had an alert and possibly a brilliant mind, untrained as it was, and as he possessed his full share of male egoism, he must derive a tingling satisfaction in molding it. And it was equally manifest that he was stimulated by her Giterish points of view.

She was comparatively obscure now, but she was quite well aware that after she had taken a more prominent place in her world she would be unable to spend hours of every day in one man's company—year after year. A man to whom she was not even engaged. She would be "talked about," "dropped," even in this lenient age. Or if society outwardly condoned the friendship it would not cease from horrible inferences. As Gita's lively imagination projected them the blood burned all over her body and crimsoned her face to her hair. *That* would be only less awful than if some man kidnapped her and subjected her to every indignity.

No, she would give him up first.

But what would she do without him?

She had been sincere in her casual assurance that she loved him. After Millicent's death she had believed she never could love anyone again. But she had been made over in so many ways! She certainly loved Elsie, in a lesser degree Polly; she could have been fond of her grandmother if she had lived a few years longer and been well and companionable. And Eustace. He was the perfect companion and friend. He never struck a false note, he was kind, sympathetic, and understanding —unique among men, she was convinced. He had flashed the torch of his splendid intelligence into every dark recess of her being, and chased out the bogies.

He could not bore if he made a valiant attempt, and he knew when to talk, to listen, and to ask her opinion on subjects of which even she knew more than himself.

He never assumed the detestable superiority of the male, and yet was never unmanly. No man could be less so. He was a virile figure on the links and tennis-court, he could outwalk herself, he was a fine swimmer. In France he had served with distinction and she knew that if the peace of his country were threatened again he would be the first to enlist. Even when lounging in the deepest of her chairs or stretched out at full length in the wood he never suggested weakness or inertia.

And his books—she had now read them all—had power in spite of their refinement of phrasing and vocabulary, their supreme mental distinction. He wrote about sex a lot, to be sure, but in the detached manner of a medical student dissecting the physical anatomy. His personal attitude to his characters no reader could guess. He was primarily an intellect handsomely provided by Nature with a sound healthy body that it might send a stream of pure blood to his brain.

In his relations with her he never suggested sex for a moment. Not even this morning. He had been on the psychological hunt as usual. She had encountered the eyes of too many carnalites. Encountered them still.

If he wanted to marry her in order to keep her for himself without scandal, that was natural enough. He had had two perfect comrades in his life, herself and his mother, and as he had lost one irrevocably it was not likely he would lose the other if he could help it.

Nor could *she* give *him* up, not even if she were obliged to marry him to save herself from being the object of loathsome suspicions and innuendoes.

Well, why not? The ceremony would be a mere concession to prejudice, and they could go on as they were forever. She would have his protection and companionship, and he would have the one woman in his life who

had meant anything to him since Bladina's death. And be mightily proud of herself besides. She would cultivate the Carteret grand manner and be one more feather in his already decorated cap. He had given her more than one cause for the profoundest gratitude, and it would be her delight to repay him.

She recalled the day when she had sat on the sands after the tilt with her grandmother and reflected that she had not an illusion; and a horror and hatred of life. Well, she still had no illusions but horror and hatred had fled. And although Polly and Elsie had contributed, to him belonged the credit of completing the cure. She was now not happy at intervals but consistently. And satisfied as she was with the present she looked to the future with an eager indubious eye. Under his expert guidance life in all its multiform phases would unroll, for he devoted only his mornings and but eight months of the year to work; and it was quite evident he enjoyed playing his own part in life as well as being one of its chroniclers. And he had every opportunity to live it to the full.

And she, herself, wanted to live, to see all there was to see, learn all there was to know. A girl alone had small chance of that unless she had a gift that brought the world to her feet. If she abandoned her background she became the natural prey of men. She doubted if any man would dare make love to Eustace Bylant's wife.

She smiled as she thought of Polly, who nonchalantly assumed that no plan of hers could go wrong. She had thought her fatuous, fortunately placed as she was; and here was herself tearing a leaf out of Polly's book. Well, why not? Life was fairly shoving her at a book with pleasant rustling leaves and bidding her choose.

She determined to put it squarely to Eustace the next

time he angled. Have it over. Senseless to fence when the business of life was up for settlement. She'd get more out of life as a married girl than running round with Polly's crowd, incidentally enlivened with harmless sophisticates. That would be seeing life through the wrong end of an opera-glass.

"So that's that." And she climbed into bed and fell asleep at once.

CHAPTER XVIII

But time passed and Bylant betrayed no part of his purpose again. He had lingered on in Chelsea, and finally announced he would make no visits that year, nor return to New York until after Christmas; and while he told Gita frankly that he was remaining on her account, he was as matter-of-fact as if he were a tutor reluctant to leave a promising pupil.

Two days after Gita had sketched out her platform Mrs. Pleyden called her on the telephone and invited her for dinner on the following evening.

"You see, my dear, it is over four months since your grandmother's death, and you must be dull at times," she said with crisp sympathy. "I am sure she would agree with me that you should begin to see more of your future friends and associates (she means men, thought Gita), and before you go to New York for the winter. It will make things so much easier for you. And we are very informal. The men do not dress for dinner—of course the girls do!—but when the men are let off that means we are really informal."

Gita, nothing loath, as Eustace would be there to sustain her, permitted herself to be frankly bored once a week and made no pretense of listening to anyone but Bylant; who sat always at the right of his admiring hostess. His mellow voice came to her across the excited chatter of the others, who, as she had expected, said nothing that interested her, even when she understood what they were talking about.

Bylant had his more distinguished friends down occasionally and one night he brought three to the manor to dinner. Gita dressed herself with even more interest in her appearance than usual and ordered Topper to bring up three bottles of vintage champagne from the cellar, and the cook to excel herself. At last she was to meet three of the most famous of the sophisticates, her future companions and friends. But one was fat, one was bald, and one after his second glass of champagne fell into a sentimental monologue inspired by his wife and two children. Nevertheless, their talk at times was scintillating and provocative, and their manner to herself irreproachable. One of the men at Polly's last dinner had tried to snatch her hand under the table, his ankle receiving an answering caress from the sharp heel of her slipper; but these men, either because they were more interested in her dinner than herself, or because they looked upon her as Bylant's private preserve, gave her no cause for future disquiet. She knew so much of their world from Eustace and Elsie that she was able to follow their somewhat random and ejaculatory talk and interpret their casual allusions. Their criticism of this author and that was given with sharp finality, and she rather admired their air of omniscience. She hoped she would acquire it herself when she was one of them. And they were rather lovable creatures, for their blasting comment was without bitterness and it was pleasant to bask in the atmosphere of people so thoroughly pleased with themselves. It was apparent they had a genuine appreciation of Eustace Bylant's work, and took a friendly interest in Elsie's. At Polly's the conversation had been mainly of bootleggers. Not that this subject was one of indifference to the sophisticates; far from it; but the accident of fortune commanded a

wider range of interests; and perhaps they were not averse from displaying their resources to this handsome young hostess who hung on their words.

"I liked them all," said Gita enthusiastically to Bylant on the day following as they sat by the pool in the wood. "I hope they'll come often. Next summer I shall have house-parties. I'll know more of your friends by that time and if all are as clever and convenable as these it will be like having a salon. I should feel very proud."

"Your occasional naïveté and humility are enchanting! But Elsie is going to Europe next summer. You will have to fall back on Mrs. Pleyden's aunt."

"I might be married."

"Married!" Bylant, who had been lounging comfortably, sat up straight. *"You?"*

"It would be better in some ways," said Gita musingly.

"What—what—*you*——" Bylant could hardly articulate.

"I think you'd do very well. What would you answer if I proposed to you?"

Bylant's face, which had turned white, suddenly looked as if the blood would burst through the skin. "I don't understand you," he stuttered.

"Mean to say you don't want to marry me?"

"Of course I do!" he exploded. "But how did you find it out?"

"Oh, I'm not as dense as you think. I suppose, as you're really conventional, you'd have liked to do the proposing yourself."

"Not a bit of it. I don't care a damn——" And then a flicker of apprehension in Gita's eyes, otherwise as cold and calm as the pool, struck a warning note in his consciousness. He sank back on his elbow. The blood ebbed from his face and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us have this out," he said practically. "Unless, of course, you are cultivating your sense of humor."

"Not at all. I've known for some time you intended to marry me, and when Mrs. Pleyden insisted I meet those one-ideaed tanked-up friends of Polly's often enough to convince me of the utter boredom of a winter in their society, and always had you on hand to make them appear like morons by contrast (she doesn't share Polly's enthusiasm for my outrée self, you know), and when you trotted out three of your friends, infinitely superior, but by no means dangerous, I knew the siege was closing in."

"Good lord!" muttered Bylant.

"You needn't blush. I admire your tactics immensely."

"I believe you'd see through a stone wall."

"Say a gauze curtain with an arc-light behind it. I fancy I'll get a lot of fun out of life."

"I fancy you will." His tones were as dry as his tongue.

"And I'd get a lot more with you than I could by myself——"

"But I thought marriage to you was anathema." Bylant hardly knew what he was saying. What in heaven's name was this incalculable girl driving at?

"In the commonplace sense, of course. But with us it would be different. We'd just hitch up as a matter of form, and then we could be together always."

There was no rising inflection in her cool clear voice. Nor any accent of finality. She assumed, beyond question, that the arrangement would be as agreeable to him as to her royal self.

For a moment Bylant did not raise his eyes; he had kept them carefully lowered. Then he sat up and lit a cigarette. His tan did not conceal his pallor but his

eyes were as calm and steady as those hard black diamonds opposite.

"I think I'll accept your offer of marriage," he said lightly. "You took my breath away or I shouldn't have been so ungallant as to hesitate—seemingly. I hope you didn't think me that?" His voice was whimsically anxious.

"I know men are not accustomed to being proposed to even now, although I wouldn't put it past some of the girls. But I knew you'd take forever to summon up your courage, so why not take the bull by the horns—bad simile, that. You're just a dear old ox."

"Thanks!" Once more Bylant could hardly articulate, but the humor of the situation overcame him and he burst into a roar of laughter. Gita smiled in delighted response. She had hated to embarrass him, and any man must feel a bit of a fool who had forced a girl to propose to him.

"Of course," he said at length, mopping his brow with one of the fine cambric handkerchiefs Gita had so often admired. "I should have asked you to marry me in time. I was only waiting on a propitious moment."

"But you're so slow and cautious you'd have kept putting it off—you're really a little afraid of me, you know."

"Oh, I am! I am!"

"And I want to be with you next winter, not Mrs. Pleyden. I suppose Polly has told you that gorgeous plan of hers, but it wouldn't work, not if I know Mrs. Pleyden. She lets Polly have her own way—BUT. Well, she'd freeze the aliens out somehow, if only because she'd be afraid Polly—who's much too good for the crowd she runs with—would take it into her head to marry one of them. The sense of class may skip a generation

but it's a little brass idol perched right in the middle of Mrs. Pleyden's inner shrine. . . . I suppose there are hundreds of decent young chaps about, well-born and well-bred at that, but if there are they have no use for the hip-pocket crowd and run with girls of another sort. Too bad. Polly——"

"I'm not interested in Polly. I know no one better able to take care of herself. Are you giving me to understand that you want to marry me at once?"

"About the first of January. Things are all right now, and I'm safe from Mrs. Pleyden until she moves to New York. You won't mind living at the manor in summer, I hope? And coming here off and on in winter? I really love the manor."

"Oh, not at all! It is difficult to imagine you anywhere else. But I'll have to see about an apartment in New York at once. My rooms——"

Gita sprang to her feet and danced on the turf. "And we'll furnish it together! I always wanted to buy lovely things for a house. When mother and I were at our worst—living in one room in a pension—we used to amuse ourselves furnishing imaginary apartments. It was a regular game and helped a lot."

"I think on the whole we'd better have a house."

"Why? An apartment is much less trouble."

"Well—you see—we'd each be more independent. I could have the top floor to myself—my typewriter makes a horrible racket——"

"I'd love to have a whole floor to myself, and I'd never go near yours. Elsie has me well trained. I'd never dare cross the threshold of her study."

"You will make a model wife!"

"I hate that word. We'll just be partners."

"Right." He rose also. "Let's shake hands on it."

She shook his hand heartily. Then she raised herself on tiptoe and pecked his cheek. "Now, you know I love you!" she exclaimed.

"Haven't the least doubt of it," he mumbled. "May I announce the engagement at once?"

"Do. Let's have it over. Elsie will be delighted, and so will Mrs. Pleyden. Polly won't, but Polly must find out sometime that she can't have every least little thing her own way."

CHAPTER XIX

"My God!" exclaimed Bylant. He was in Elsie's study, whither she had summoned him after his return to the house; she frequently sought his advice, and a deep and understanding friendship existed between them. He knew the situation could not have escaped her, and had felt that if he did not disburden himself he should become hysterical and make some fatal mistake. "Was ever a man in such a damnable situation before?"

"But it gives you your great chance," said Elsie practically. "She just naturally got herself engaged to you and she will just as naturally drift into being your wife."

"She looks upon me as a male clothes-horse with a conveniently human head. More likely she'll get too well used to me, see me more and more as an intellectual automaton—— My God, how can any woman be so obtuse!"

"Remember that Gita has had a unique and devastating experience. She's erected a sort of rampart about herself with charged wires on top, and communicates with a few favored mortals through the peep-holes. To be more scientific, I never knew a mind that had itself so thoroughly censored."

"That's what I'm afraid of . . . it is a well-known fact that when women deliberately repress their natural impulses, frigidity is the inevitable result."

"But not at Gita's age. And frigidity is generally the refuge of unwilling wives. Gita is hardly in their

class! When she should have been enjoying a commonplace innocent childhood and adolescence she accumulated a rotten knowledge of depraved men of her own class; but at least, being Gita, she saved herself from the worst. Now, after these months in your constant society, she has learned what a thoroughly decent man is like. I think it quite possible she is more in love with you than she knows. She simply can't make the connection, that's all. She's still inside the fort."

"Of course if I didn't believe that I'd never go in for this grotesque marriage. The situation is bad enough as it is, but if I hadn't that hope—it'll be hell, all the same."

"Not nearly such hell as if you'd proposed to her and seen her shudder with disgust if you'd let yourself go. Now you know just where you stand. She really loves you in her own queer way, and I don't believe another man lives she'd marry. All the cards are in your hands. You'll have a thousand chances to make her fall in love with you, make her feel she needs you more and more. Did she give you a peck?"

"That is the word for it!"

"You've taken a longer stride than you know. It means a lot with her. She's pecked me several times and held my hand once. Polly has never been honored."

"You encourage me! But——" He stood up and shook himself, as if in disgust at his moment of panic. "I have no intention of failing. It's a matter of destiny, anyhow. All we realists are romantics fundamentally, and as she's the woman I've been on the blind hunt for all my life and I recognized her the moment we met, there can be only one ending, however disheartening the

prelude. If it were not for her cursed inhibitions she'd have known it too, long before this. But I can wait!"

And Elsie, who had resolutely forgotten her day-dreams, reassured him warmly. "It's as inevitable as the fructification of the soil when the sun shines on it long enough. We know how we'd work it out in a novel, or rather how, with two such characters, it would work itself out."

"A novel that doesn't belie its name and isn't merely a story, must conform strictly to life, and life has many unexpected cross-currents." Bylant was gloomy once more.

"True enough. But there comes a moment in every novel when the author for the first time is able to foresee the inevitable end. All signs point one way. That is where predestination comes in. Now, if you've calmed down, perhaps you'll give me a bit of advice on a knot I've tied myself into. There are a few things about the novel I haven't yet mastered, and one is technique."

"Good!" Bylant smiled wanly. "Just the let-down I need before lunch."

CHAPTER XX

GITA decided to have a Christmas party. She knew that from the time the manor house had been built, down through the generations until the Carteret fortunes declined, there had been a ball and a Christmas tree for the servants and tenantry, and a gathering of the far-flung Carteret clan. The tenants were reduced to two farmers and their families, who, no doubt, would resent any hint of patronage, the servants to five, within and without, and the Carterets to one, but at least she could have a tree and a party. The tree and dancing would be in the great central hall with her dark-browed ancestors looking down in approval.

Polly Pleyden and Elsie Brewster entered into her plans with enthusiasm (neither Mrs. Pleyden nor Mr. Donald was consulted), and Bylant, who was feeling somewhat exhausted after weeks of house-hunting and furnishing, and speculating with alternate gloom and hope on his future, looked forward to the occasion as one more ordeal to be endured. He should have to submit to congratulations in company with Gita for the first time, for she had attended no more dinners in Chelsea; and he had been able to dodge felicitations himself for the most part, as his time had been fully occupied in New York. Gita had gone to the Pleyden apartment for several days every week (chaperoned by the aunt) and together they had found a charming old red brick house with white trimmings in West Twelfth Street. It had been renovated by its last owner, who had decided

to move uptown, and there was little for Bylant to do but send his own things to the third story, and "stand round" while Gita, who rarely asked his advice, chose rugs and furniture for the two lower floors. Elsie, after she finished her book, undertook the prosaic commission of furnishing the kitchen and the servants' rooms in the extension.

Gita bought the narrowest brass bedstead she could find, as a contrast, she gayly told Bylant, to her prevailing four-posters, and had her room done up in yellow that it might the more surely reflect the sunlight that streamed through the large southern windows. The chairs and curtains were of chintz and the only pieces of manor furniture were a tulipwood chest, with each of the drawers painted in different design and soft faded colors, and a day-bed she found in the attic; both built in the late seventeenth century. There was no spare bedroom, and the day-bed, its head manipulated by chains, was to offer its inhospitable surface to Elsie whenever she spent a night in New York. Otherwise it was a chaise longue piled with cushions.

Her sitting-room, adjoining, she furnished almost entirely from the manor: with a tavern table (reclaimed from the stables), a pond-lily box with raised carving, an oak box with two rows of arched flutes, a secretary with a single-arch molding and ball feet, two paneled chairs from the dining-room, several Windsor chairs and two new ones for comfort, a pine-paneled settle with a high back, and a Dutch marriage-chest from the house in Albany. The curtains in the manor house were faded and mended, but many of the fine old rugs were in good condition and she sent over a pale Aubusson, ordered curtains of artichoke-green pongee, and had the walls tinted in harmony.

Remembering her mother's love of old French furniture, she haunted auction-rooms and picked up a set of eight pieces covered with tapestry framed in wood painted black and decorated with gilt bow-knots; which, the auctioneer assured his public, had once graced a château in Brittany. At all events it graced the big drawing-room in West Twelfth Street, and, mindful of man's love of comfort, she had a large davenport and several easy chairs made that harmonized in color if not in dubious antiquity. The rug was black velvet, the walls were pale gray, and hung eventually with odd old landscapes painted by long-forgotten artists for former Bylants and Carterets. Singly they were caricatures of art, but together, and monopolizing the field, they completed the atmosphere of lightness and charm, and this room also faced south.

Bylant, who was about to re-lease his house in Albany, reserved the dining-room furniture; his family silver, long stored, was little inferior to that of Carteret manor, and included Dutch pieces brought to the settlement from Holland in the early seventeenth century. The chairs were Jacobean and a Knickerbocker Kas served as a sideboard and for the display of the larger pieces of silver. He also sent for two fine tapestries; and hoped that his prosperous brothers in art with fashionable socialist tendencies would not cut him. His own chambers had been comfortable but severe, and so was his refuge under the roof.

The narrow hall was painted white and furnished only with a high wide chair made in Connecticut in the seventeenth century, from the Flemish pattern, and an English ecclesiastical chest.

Gita had been so absorbed in this furnishing of her city home, and in the fulfillment of an old day-dream,

that she barely remembered she was to occupy the house with a canonical husband, and Bylant was by no means blind to her attitude. He was impatient with himself when he recognized that he was seething with dull masculine resentment, and heroically made and remade an effort to adapt himself to his fantastic situation with philosophy, and trust to time and daily association to do its inevitable work. To be the sulky misused husband was no part of his program; but playing the rôle of sympathetic friend and intellectual partner under that narrow roof was a discouraging prospect to a highly organized nervous system, already overstrained by months of directing a naturally mobile temperament into channels of unbroken repose—during long hours on duty, at least—and acting the part of a sexless intelligence. He foresaw attacks of nervous irritability in the seclusion of his fortress upstairs.

CHAPTER XXI

GITA, who would not consent to sacrifice the least of her pines, bought a large tree in Atlantic City and decorated it with the help of Elsie and Polly. The young gardener was sent in quest of a cart-load of holly, and the vast chimneypiece in the hall and the heavy gilt frames of the Carterets were obliterated. The floor was waxed and the refectory table moved into one of the smaller drawing-rooms. There were to be thirty guests, chosen by Polly and Bylant, but Gita, suddenly remembering Dr. Pelham, wrote a brief note asking him to come if he could find time for anything so frivolous as a Christmas party. Somewhat to her surprise he accepted.

She delegated to Polly and Eustace the task of selecting a trifle for each of the guests, and the more practical Elsie undertook to buy substantial presents for the servants; but the gifts for themselves caused her a good deal of mental perturbation. She was generous by nature but hesitated to send any more bills to Mr. Donald. Bylant had been adamant to her desire to pay half the expense of furnishing the house, but under the tutelage of her two other friends, her trousseau had exceeded her income for the year, and Mr. Donald had formally "advised" her that he had been forced to sacrifice a valuable bond. She had replied haughtily that she had no intention of encroaching on her capital in the future but that marriage was not expected to wait upon income.

She finally poured out the contents of the jewel-casket

on her bed one night, and pried out a diamond and emerald from the tiara. She had promised her grandmother not to sell any of the jewels but her conscience reminded her that nothing had been said about giving. A jeweler in Atlantic City set the emerald in a ring for Elsie and the diamond as a pendant on a thin platinum chain for Polly.

But there still remained the problem of Eustace. She rummaged the drawers of a court chest in her grandfather's dressing-room and found a gold signet-ring with a lapis-lazuli scarab set in a richly carved hoop with tiny dragons on its shoulders. It was indisputably an antique and valuable, and eminently appropriate for a man of fastidious taste. But some submerged feminine instinct warned her that he would appreciate even more highly a supplementary present that betrayed some thought on her part and a modicum of personal sacrifice.

She went to the most expensive shop on the Boardwalk and ordered a dozen fine cambric handkerchiefs to be embroidered with his initials. He might have several dozen already, but at least he would be made subtly aware that she had not confined her attentions to his distinguished top-story. She sent the bill to Mr. Donald.

A few days before Christmas Polly arrived at the manor early in the morning and announced herself possessed of an inspiration.

"Why not have a fancy-dress party——"

"There's no time." Gita and Elsie protested in chorus.

"Yes, there is if all those cedar chests in the attic are full of old duds. Modern gowns in this old hall would look horrid and the men even worse. There must be stacks if this old manor runs true to form. They never sold things in those days and of course they were too good to pass on to the servants."

The three raced one another up to the attic. The chests were locked, and as even Topper could not produce the keys, the gardener was sent for to pry them open. Then the carefully folded garments were shaken out and inspected. There was nothing more modern than the fashions of the eighteen-nineties, for by that time, no doubt, the Carteret ladies had begun to make over their fine clothes and wear them out. But anything later than 1830 was rejected with scorn. They sorted out gowns of taffeta and satin, mousseline-de-soie and velvet, in styles Pompadour, Empire, Watteau, and the Four Georges; tiny pointed waists, voluminous skirts, long trains and mere slips.

"We'll have to powder our hair and wear corsets," said Polly, "but we'll set back a few centuries in that old hall, so who'll mind a little discomfort?"

"Powdered bobbed hair will be a scream," said Gita, who had been surveying her new possessions with dazzled eyes and hearing a ghostly patter of tiny feet along her nerves. "Why not wigs? One of the hair-dressers in Atlantic City could telephone for them."

"Right. Leave it to me."

Elsie, who had been investigating a chest, hitherto overlooked, lifted out a wedding-dress of heavy satin mellowed to old ivory and covered with priceless point-lace. "Did you ever see anything so lovely?" she gasped.

"I know who wore that!" cried Polly. "Your grandmother, Gita. I've seen it in an old album of granny's, I remember—granny, who was one of her bridesmaids, got going about that wedding to mother one day and wondered why all that lace hadn't been passed on to your aunt Evelyn when she married."

Gita laid the gown across her arms and looked at it reverently. She knew the value of old lace, for her

mother had possessed several fine pieces before they went to pay a gambling-debt, and part of her education had been in museums where there was always a room devoted to thread filigree; particularly beloved of Millicent. In Bruges and Brussels she had often seen the nuns at work. But although she had found several pieces of Irish and Honiton in a chest in her grandmother's room, she had hardly glanced at them. Real lace didn't match short skirts and bobbed hair.

But this mass of point d'Alençon was quite another matter, and she experienced the same sensation as when she had gazed first upon the soft sheen of her pearls.

"I shall be married in this," she announced. "I'd intended to wear any old thing I happened to have on. But *this*—— Oh, yes! And just as it is. The waist will have to be let out for I couldn't stand a corset five minutes."

"Gita!" Elsie, who was sitting back on her heels, suddenly sprang to her feet and clapped her hands. "It's my turn to have an inspiration. Why don't you marry Eustace on Christmas Eve—spring a surprise at the end of the party?"

Polly, who after months of intimacy with Gita sometimes felt as young as her years, fairly danced. "Gorgeous! It will be the night of our lives. I can see you stepping down those stairs with a powdered footman on either side——"

"Haven't any footmen——"

"We'll hire them—no, make two of the men dress up."

"I can't have a wedding like that without your mother and Mr. Donald." Gita, surrounded by these ancestral feminine relics, was feeling every inch a Carteret.

"They'll be told to arrive with Dr. Lancaster on the

stroke of midnight—no, ten minutes before. Leave it to me."

"But suppose Eustace—he's the sort that hates to be rushed—I should think."

"He hasn't a thing to do but get the license and wedding-ring. Of course he won't mind."

Gita turned to Elsie, her brows drawn together. "What do you think? You ought to know him better than any of us."

"I agree with Polly. Why shouldn't he be enchanted?" Her eyes were shining, her cheeks burning.

"Why are you so anxious to marry me off in a hurry?" asked Gita suspiciously.

"Anxious? I'm no more anxious than Polly. I want to look on at a wonderful picture, that's all. I intend to stand on that chair by the fireplace when you come down the stair."

"But if I'm married like that I'll have to have bridesmaids, and you'll both come down behind me."

"Bridesmaids——"

"Not much," cried Polly. "We'd spoil the picture. We'll be bridesmaids all right, but we'll wait at the foot of the stairs. So will Eustace. Might as well turn all the old regulations upside down while we're about it."

Gita jerked up her shoulders. "Well. Have it your own way. But—well—I'm not in such a hurry to marry."

Her hesitation was unaccountable to herself. What difference did a week make? She glanced at the dress on her arms. It had covered the slim body of a girl glowing with love for the man she was about to marry. Her own wedding would be a caricature of that wedding-day half a century ago. And again something stirred along her nerves, ghostly whisperings, no doubt, of the women who had laughed and loved and danced and co-

quetted in these gowns which should have been dust with themselves. . . . There was something both ironic and sinister in the living persistence of textile and fashion —over God's own image! . . . Those Colonial women had loved and married as a matter of course, wasted their time on no problems beyond babies and death and a new gown for the governor's ball. Life had been very simple in those old days in the Colonies.

She scowled and threw the gown on a box. "All right," she said sharply. "I'll speak to Eustace tonight. Now let's pick out the gowns for the party, and you, Polly, cart off the rest for the other girls to choose from. I think I'll take this one as it wasn't made for corsets."

She held up a narrow gown of gold-colored gauze with a low pointed neck, high belt, and short slashed puffed sleeves. Elsie chose a silk robe printed with foliage, with a Watteau pleat behind extending into a train, wide elbow-sleeves with deep ruffles of lace.

Polly, after rejecting eight or ten of the most elaborate gowns, professed herself satisfied with one of plum-colored velvet over a figured satin petticoat and long pointed waist, panniers and full skirts. Then they carried the gowns downstairs and put all but two into Polly's motor and the gardener was told to take three chests containing masculine regalia to Eustace Bylant's lodgings on the following morning.

CHAPTER XXII

BYLANT came to dinner and was immediately told of the projected fancy-dress ball and the riches of the attic; but it had been agreed that the plans for the wedding should be communicated by Gita in the privacy of the library, when Elsie, as ever, had retired to her study.

Bylant, who was looking tired and depressed, brightened visibly. He grasped at the idea of being someone quite different from himself for a few hours, and his severely repressed love of the picturesque could have its way for once.

"I'll go as one of the old governors," he said. "Cornbury, for choice. He fell in love with his wife's ear—before marriage, of course—and I've permitted even myself that much. Besides, he was a villain, and I'd enjoy being that for a night."

Gita laughed merrily. "Dear old Eustace! You couldn't be a villain if you tried. But you must be pompous and stately, for you and Polly are to lead off in a minuet. We haven't the least idea what a minuet is like, but you'll line up and bow, turn, dance a few steps forward and retreat. No drinks will be passed till it's over."

"Then it will be stiff enough. I'll not tell the men that or they won't come."

As they left the dining-room Gita took his arm and pressed it affectionately. "I've a still greater surprise for you," she whispered.

"Indeed?" He dared not detach himself but he averted

his eyes. He had never seen her look so beautiful. She wore a very soft, very clinging gown, the shade of the American Beauty rose; one of the fine flowers of her trousseau. It matched the deep flush of excitement in her cheeks and her eyes were bigger and brighter and blacker than ever.

"Do you mind if we go outside?" he asked. "It's a clear night."

"I don't mind, but we'll have to walk to keep warm, and you always choose the most comfortable chair in the library for your cigar."

"I rather feel like walking."

Her long cape was in the entrance-hall and as she disappeared into its dark folds he gave a sigh of relief and put on his Burberry and cap.

"Now, what do you think it is?" she demanded as they strolled down the avenue.

"My faculty for guessing has dried up these last weeks."

"I found my grandmother's wedding-gown in the attic and it is such a dream of beauty that I decided then and there to be married in it. And then we all decided to have the wedding the night of the party. Midnight. Nobody to have a hint of it till I sail down that stair. Of course, if you like the idea," she added, suddenly tactful. "But we all thought the picture would appeal to that fine artistic taste of yours."

He was silent for a moment, then replied with a shrug: "Good idea. Something to remember. It will be rather theatrical, of course."

"Call it dramatic. I mean to get all the drama out of life I can."

"You do? I suppose you don't mean what most women would by that, but perhaps you'll explain just

what you do mean. There's nothing very dramatic in being prosaically married and living in West Twelfth Street."

"Oh, you can't plan drama too far ahead. But I've always known I was cut out for it. In a not too pleasant way I've had a lot of it already. I fancy I draw it like a magnet——"

"And I'm to be the chorus, I suppose!"

"Of course there's nothing dramatic about you, Eustace dear, or I shouldn't be marrying you, but—— Oh, my goodness! Great heavens!"

"What's the matter? Do you see drama approaching down the perspective of this damp avenue? I vote we get out of it——"

"There's something—I never thought of till this minute."

"Well? What is it?"

"I'm afraid you won't like it."

"I probably shan't." Bylant was in a thoroughly bad humor.

"Well, I must come out with it. My grandmother wanted me to ask the man I married to take my name. I wouldn't promise because I never intended to marry—but, well—I find I don't like the idea of giving up my own name."

"Sounds like the Lucy Stone League. Continue to call yourself Gita Carteret, by all means. We're used to it."

"But wouldn't you be willing to take the name of Carteret?"

"I would not!" exploded Bylant. "I may be an ass but I'm not an emasculated ass. And Bylant, I'd have you know, is as old and honorable a name as Carteret. It came over from Holland before a Carteret was ever heard of——"

"Oh, of course! I understand," said Gita hurriedly. "A few months ago—but I do now. But wouldn't you be willing to call yourself Bylant-Carteret?"

"I would not!"

"Well, that's that. At least I've done my duty and asked you. And you don't mind if I remain Gita Carteret?"

"Don't care a hang."

"I never saw you cross before. Do you think we'll squabble? It would be rather exciting."

"Not in our sort of—alliance. Nor have I any intention of doing anything so undignified. I'm sorry I let go, but it hits a man on the raw to be asked to give up his name."

"Sorry. Let's forget it. Suppose we go over to the Boardwalk and look at the lights. We might take in a movie."

"All right. Come along."

CHAPTER XXIII

The band was in a small gallery, built originally for musicians, at the left of the stair. As the manor house was still dependent upon gas the hall was illuminated by pine torches, safely ensconced in tall vases. The minuet, which had terminated in a romp, was over, and the guests were crowded about a punch-bowl which had been wheeled in on a buffet-wagon.

The girls had accepted the idea of bygone costumes with enthusiasm, but the men had required a good deal of persuasion. Bylant's friends had protested at what would look like giving their countenance to a brand of fiction they despised, and at sacrificing their earnest modernism for even a night. But after they saw the contents of the chests at Bylant's rooms they succumbed: either out of inherent boyishness or man's secret love of plumage. There were four of them: Fellowes Merton, dramatic critic, Max Durand, columnist, De Witt Turner, stern realist in fiction, Potts Dawes, high priest of vers libre. Each was obliged to wear the costume that fitted him, approximately; and Turner, who was a very tall heavy man, went out and bought flounces of white cambric and sewed them to the edges of his court uniform's sleeves and knee-breeches. They were all obliged to invest in long silk stockings, and applied the largest buckles they could find to their evening pumps.

Polly's young men sulkily took what was left, and having less imagination than the others, announced that they felt like tame monkeys. Bylant sent the fanciest

of the costumes to Mrs. Pelham's house, and Geoffrey cursed his friend and vowed he would not wear it. But he did.

He had not appeared in time for the minuet, and Gita, who was standing apart, saw him as he entered and for a moment did not recognize him. He wore a long coat of pale blue satin, richly embroidered, over a white satin vest reaching to his knees, white silk stockings, satin shorts and black pumps. There were deep lace ruffles at the wrists and a jabot hung from his high stock. His white wig was tied with a blue ribbon, and altogether he looked as little like a hard-working surgeon of the twentieth century as possible. She noticed swiftly that his eyebrows were darker than she had thought, and that the blue of his eyes was intensified by the costume.

It was evident that he had entered into the spirit of the masquerade, for his habitual expression of nervous concentration had been replaced by—mingled boyish wonder and delight in his unexpected good looks? Gita knew that even as a boy he had been serious and ambitious and known few of the common impulses of youth.

He came forward smiling and shook Gita's hand, then remembered his part and would have raised it to his lips, but she drew it away hastily.

"I wonder if you are my great-great-grandfather or my great-great-greatest?" she asked gayly.

"Your brother, perhaps. Your wig looks every bit as old as mine."

"That was rather neat." She swept him a curtsey, diligently practised before the psyche mirror; her spine was limbering.

"If I were really your brother I suppose I should have offered you my congratulations before this. Let us

imagine I was off hunting Indians and only returned in time for the ball. . . . Eustace is a lucky dog!"

He was staring very hard at Gita, who in her gown of gold tissue and high-piled white wig above those black eyes and lashes that he had thought of more than once, seemed to him almost fantastically lovely. The sort of girl, he imagined, who, had she lived in a remoter era than the one she had conjured up tonight, would have had men besieging her tower and riding to battle with her ribbon on their lances.

"Thanks. Doesn't he look the real thing? He padded out his governor's uniform so that he would look portly and important."

"He certainly looks older," said Pelham, regarding Bylant critically, "but as determined as Fate."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Gita sharply.

"Oh—the expression's gone. He's no longer looking at you; he's meditating another glass of punch."

"You must have one, yourself. Come with me and I'll ladle it out for you. And introduce you to the other girls."

"But I don't dance."

"Then you can sit out with me. I don't dance, either."

She helped him to the punch and introduced him casually. Polly's eyes glittered and she took him firmly by the arm as the musicians began to play a fox-trot. "Never mind if you don't know how," she said, as he protested, almost in panic. "Any man who can wear that get-up like a native—or should I say to the manor born?—can learn to dance in five minutes. Just take my hand and a good grip on my back and I'll do the rest."

Gita looked on with a faint throb of resentment. She remembered that Pelham's conversation had interested her, and had intended to take him into the drawing-

room. To her amazement he fell into step almost at once, and smiled down with evident appreciation into the ingenuous orbs of his teacher, who had flung her train over her arm and was dancing with her usual abandon.

"Well, are you satisfied? Your inspiration is a thundering success." It was Eustace who was smiling down at *her*. He looked large and dignified in his governor's uniform and white wig, and a massive gold chain was slung about his neck; but for the first time his narrow pointed beard did not deflect attention from his rather plump cheeks and his lower lip had lost its muscular compression.

"Oh, yes—it looks like it." But she had drawn her brows together and looked the reverse of contented. "You've got yourself pretty well into your part. I don't know that I like you so well. . . ."

"Too much punch. My eyes feel rather watery, and of course we all fortified ourselves with cocktails at my rooms. I wish you'd let me teach you this dance."

"Well, I won't. Run along and trot. You must have asked Joan Ryder, for she's watching you and is the only girl not dancing."

"So I did. But I hate to leave you alone."

"I expected to be alone. And I'm going into the drawing-room to rest. My heels are higher than usual and my feet ache."

She made her way past the trotting couples—they had had no time to learn even polkas and waltzes—and entered the drawing-room. It was softly lit with wax candles, and looked, she thought, much as it must have done when the costumes worn tonight were new. The paneled walls reflected the blades of yellow light, for Topper had polished them vigorously, and she had a

fancy that the stately old pieces of furniture had come to life themselves and wore an air of expectancy.

She removed her slippers and elevated her feet to a stool. She was about to light a cigarette, but shrugged her shoulders. Why spoil the picture? Get out of her part? She had surrendered to illusion out there in the hall.

She wondered idly if another Gita Carteret, long forgotten, had taken possession of her. Then she frowned and jerked her shoulders. Those old Gitas at her age had either been married or were in love with a "swain" —someone as good-looking as Geoffrey Pelham, no doubt; and, if permitted a moment of retirement, would have been dreaming of his perfections, indulging in romantic musings. She wondered if any of the girls would fall in love with him tonight. Polly had evidently marked him for her own, but Polly was as cold-blooded as Eustace; she would flirt with him desperately tonight and forget his existence on the morrow.

Her mind swung uneasily to Eustace. He looked detestable in that puffed wig and with punch relaxing the muscles of his face. Like quite another person. It was all very well to act up to his character as a beefy and dissipated old governor but she'd warn him at the end of this dance that if he didn't let the punch-bowl alone she'd cut out one part of the program. And she'd never marry him in that wig.

She moved restlessly in her chair and beat with her heels on the stool. Once more she felt an overwhelming reluctance to marry. Of course she had not changed her mind, and of course the Eustace of five months could not be obliterated by the caricature of a night. He was a dear and had inspired in her the deepest affection she had felt since the death of her mother; had, in a meas-

ure, taken her place. And he could give her the large free life she craved. But two or three months hence would be time enough. . . . Moreover . . . she dimly felt she was outraging the girls who had left this old manor with their husbands, before her. . . . Who had worn this dress of gold tissue? she wondered. A young married woman, probably, with a baby or two!

She laughed harshly, then almost cried out as she heard Geoffrey Pelham's voice behind her.

"I suppose you are laughing at your guests," he said, as he took a chair opposite. "The girls look charming, but the men—well, some of them give pain to a student of anatomy. I wonder if I may smoke?"

"Please do." Gita had hastily lowered her feet and tucked them under her long skirts. "You never could guess what I was laughing at and I'll never tell you. How do you like dancing?"

"Good exercise, I should think; but dancing with Miss Pleyden is like dancing with a ball of thistle-down. I felt as if I should be chasing instead of trying to dance with her."

"If a girl isn't light she's not much of a dancer." The answer was mechanical. She was watching his long sensitive fingers roll a cigarette. "You must be a wonderful surgeon," she said. "One's feet are much like one's hands, I suppose, and perhaps that is the reason you learned to dance so quickly."

He reddened and grinned. "That's an idea! Are all your ideas as original as that?"

Gita never blushed, but she lowered her eyelashes more under the frank admiration of his gaze than at the compliment. "Eustace says I have flashes of intelligence. I suppose he's at that punch-bowl again." And she frowned.

"Eustace can carry a good deal, I fancy. Don't worry."

"I've no intention of worrying, but I suppose you know we are to be married tonight, and I don't care to see him held up by two of his friends, equally lit—as, no doubt, has happened often enough in this house."

"Are you to be married tonight? Elsie hadn't told me." He was staring at her with an expression that made her change her position suddenly and the curious sensation in her nerve-centers gave her the uncomfortable impression that some other Gita Carteret, who had worn this gown, perhaps—heaved suddenly in her long sleep.

"I was sure she had told you——"

"I only had a moment with Elsie tonight. She was at home when I arrived, to make sure I'd wear this costume; and as I gave her some trouble I suppose she forgot everything else."

"But Eustace told me he not only intended to ask you to be his best man but to walk down the stair with me——"

"I haven't seen Eustace for a month. If he's written I've missed the letter——"

"But you will, won't you?"

"I shall be highly honored." He shook his shoulders impatiently. "What time is the ceremony?"

"At midnight. Then we go in to supper, and after that we have the Christmas tree. Then we'll dance till morning, when Eustace's friends will probably carry him home—— Oh! How stupid of me! I should have asked him to stay here, but we've been so rushed."

"Oh—— Ah——" Pelham found himself stuttering. "It will be a unique wedding and nothing else would be appropriate for you. . . . Do you know?" he burst out irrepressibly, "I believe I should have fallen in love with

you tonight if you hadn't already been bespoken—and by my best friend. . . ."

"What nonsense!" Gita almost shrieked. "I hate that sort of nonsense! And I should have hated you if you had."

"But surely you must be used to it by this time. Wouldn't it be more truthful to say it merely bored you?"

"No, it wouldn't. Men don't fall in love with me. I don't permit it."

"Eustace seems to have succeeded. Or did you——"

"Eustace isn't the kind that falls in love any more than I am. We're wonderful friends, and as we couldn't be together constantly without being annoyed in many ways, we decided to make the stupid concession and go through the ceremony."

"Oh—I see." He was staring down at his cigarette, which threatened to fall to the rug. "But—just suppose either of you should fall in love with someone else?"

Gita's tones were heavy with scorn. "Eustace has never been in love in his life and never could be. As for myself, whatever I might have been, life made me into something quite different, and the very word makes me sick."

"Ah—you're a pathological case. I see. But pathological cases may sometimes be cured."

"Not when they don't want to be. I thank heaven I shall be free all my life, not a slave."

"Love *is* a form of slavery, I should think. I've always steered clear of it, myself."

"I rather thought you were taken with Polly." Gita turned in something like panic from any further discussion of herself.

"Miss Pleyden? She is a most charming girl, but I am

frank to say I hardly recall what she looks like, at the present moment. And I want as little as you do to be 'taken' with anyone."

He was scowling at Gita, and she scowled back, unreasonably annoyed at his emphatic utterance.

"The music has stopped again and I must go out and row Eustace," she said haughtily. "Please go ahead. I've my slippers to put on."

"May I——"

"No! That is something I do for myself. Kindly go."

CHAPTER XXIV

A DETERMINED admirer of Miss Ryder cut in early in the dance and Eustace Bylant slipped out of the hall, found his overcoat and hat, and a moment later was driving his roadster furiously toward Atlantic City. Snow lay on the ground but the stars were brilliant overhead, and the clear frosty air cooled his hot face. His brain had not been too befuddled to receive a vibration from the misgiving in Gita's, and he had skirted too many pitfalls during the past months to make a mistake tonight. He went to a hotel and took a cold shower, then visited a chemist who mixed him a reliable bromide.

He felt he had his own reasons for annoyance. It was like Gita to forget that after a man married a woman he would be expected to remain in her house unless they left at once on a wedding journey; but although he had thrown out several hints to that effect her mind had been too distracted to receive them. Nor had he been able to have a word with Elsie, who, however, might have been depended on not to overlook so important a detail.

Luckily, his friends would go directly from the manor to their hotel and leave by an early train for New York, either to spend Christmas day with their families or to pay visits elsewhere. As he was, in a way, the host of the occasion, he had an excuse to linger until the other guests had left—and then sneak home to his lodgings! But he'd have an understanding tomorrow. No one was more anxious to avoid gossip than Gita.

With a clear complexion and clearer head he presented himself before the future partner of his days shortly after a one-step had begun, and Polly once more was dancing with Dr. Pelham.

"Oh!" exclaimed Gita. "You look yourself again—except for that wig. I was going to give you a piece of my mind."

"Glad I escaped it," he said, smiling. "I went outside and cooled off my head. I'll take off the wig if you say the word. Only too glad to be rid of it."

"No. Not yet. The other men would follow suit and I don't want my picture spoiled. But mind you take it off before I come down. Nothing would induce me to marry you in it. I'd feel as if I were marrying old Cornbury."

"Well, if you wear yours I'll feel as if I were marrying my great-grandmother."

Gita laughed merrily, her equilibrium restored now that Eustace was himself again. And she felt a sudden inexplicable desire for his protection. She took his arm and led him to the deep window-seat behind the Christmas tree that stood in an angle beside the fireplace.

"It was terribly thoughtless of me not to ask you to bring your things over," she said. "But I'll have a room prepared tomorrow. Unless you'd like to go to New York at once?"

"I'd far rather stay in the country." He drew a deep sigh of relief. Gita had a way of coming to her senses—tardily, but with a satisfying completeness. It augured well for the future, and his reward would be in just proportion to his torments.

He took her hand tentatively, and to his surprise she did not draw it away. She smiled at him serenely. "It's odd," she said musingly, "but I don't mind you touching

me in the least, and I hate even to shake hands with another man."

He tightened his grasp. This was the scene and the hour for love-making, and the seclusion was complete. "I suppose you wouldn't kiss me?" Then as she frowned he added hastily, "Even men kiss one another in Europe, you know."

"Only on the cheek and always look too silly for words. But you may kiss me there if you are feeling sentimental."

The icy shower had steadied his nerves. He implanted a chaste salute on a cool cheek. "I'm not feeling in the least sentimental, but somehow it seemed the thing to do. Old Cornbury, no doubt, kissed every girl he managed to get into a corner. And knocked her wig off. By the way, we represent various eras tonight and I'm not sure they wore wigs in all of them."

"I was thinking of my party, not history. And they certainly improve most of the men, as well as the girls. I never thought anything could improve Polly, but she looks like the most exquisite miniature ever painted."

"Old Geoff evidently thinks so. He's been dancing with her all evening. He's come out of his triple-plated shell with a vengeance. Never saw such a metamorphosis. Always took for granted he had the same ugly mug as the rest of us, and he looks like a stunning old picture come to life. Polly may have met her fate."

"Wouldn't that be splendid!" Gita's voice rang with enthusiasm.

"Hardly for Geoff. But——" He gave her a sharp narrowed glance. "Odd that you should countenance even your friends' falling in love!"

"Ah, but Polly's bound to marry some day. They all think they must. And it is something to satisfy the

artistic eye of one's friends. They harmonize in looks, in height and in coloring—oh! I forgot—Polly said once she couldn't endure being married to a fair man."

"Girls have been known to change their minds." Bylant's tones were both dry and hopeful. "Nothing is safer to bet on."

"Gita! Are you there?" Elsie appeared round the corner of the tree. "It's half-past eleven. Time for you to dress."

Gita sprang to her feet wildly, her eyes darting about like those of a forest animal caught in a trap. "Oh, I can't! I——"

She met Bylant's smiling gaze, and her nerves, which had seemed to arch all over her body and hiss with a thousand voices, received a sharp admonition from her brain and subsided.

"Come along!" Her voice was gay again. "And Eustace, take off your wig."

CHAPTER XXV

GITA, attended by Polly and Elsie until the last minute that she be given no time to change her mind, stood before the psyche mirror and smiled at her reflection. She had no intention of changing her mind, for she knew that such an opportunity to outshine all other women and etch an indelible picture into the minds of all beholders, was granted to few girls even on their wedding-day.

The mass of delicate lace billowed widely about her slender figure, and the long veil (exhumed from the chest later and almost as transparent as tulle) hung from a high coronet of orange-blossoms "built" by Polly and dipped in weak coffee. She had removed her wig, and her hair, wiry and vibrant, and of an intense dusky blackness, had been drawn forward to soften the uncompromising stiffness of the head-dress. She wore her rope of pearls, and, about the base of her throat, a string of larger pearls, a present from Eustace. They had belonged to his mother.

Her eyes blazed with excitement, and her mouth, which had begun to take an upward curve at the corners, was very full and very red. Polly took out her lip-stick with a sigh.

"You are the loveliest thing on earth, Gita," announced Elsie, with the enthusiasm of both artist and friend. "If ever you are in the mood to hate life just remember tonight."

"Night of your life," agreed Polly. "Don't make any

mistake about it. Spin out the descent of that stair as long as you can. Such a chance doesn't come twice in a lifetime. Come along."

Pelham and John Trowbridge, a friend of Polly's and of corresponding height, armed with large silver candelabra, stood near the head of the stair. (They had flatly refused to put on livery.) Polly posed Gita between them and regarded the tableau critically.

"Hold those candelabra a bit higher," she commanded. "And don't wabble. Nor, what is equally important, spill grease on that lace. Now, rest your arms until the band strikes up. I must go ahead and drive them to this end of the hall. Elsie, better light these candles first."

The guests were dancing, but the arrival of Mrs. Pelham, Mr. Donald, and the clergyman in his robes of office, had advised them of some startling change in the program, and they were not surprised when the music stopped abruptly and Polly, her hand admonishing, appeared on the stair.

"Come down to this end all of you—over there; and afterward move into the middle of the room." A moment later a mass of white wigs looked like a sudden descent of snowballs above a variegated flower-bed, ruffled by a faint but agitating breeze. On the broad landing Elsie applied a lighted taper to eight long candles set in high brackets.

Dr. Lancaster took his position solemnly in front of the chimneypiece that had looked down on so many Carteret brides. Mrs. Pleyden, who had no intention of striking too incongruous a note, wore a gown of rose-pink velvet with panniers made from a point-lace shawl, and had powdered her hair. She looked haughty and disapproving, however, and so did Mr. Donald, who was

to give, thankfully, the bride away. Both were astonished that Polly and Eustace Bylant, the quintessence of modernism, should lend themselves to anything so theatrical. Of course, anything might be expected of Gita, and, no doubt, she had been encouraged by Mrs. Brewster, who was by way of being a "bohemian."

Eustace, wigless and very pale, took his position at the foot of the stair, the bridesmaids behind him. Topper and the other servants, who had been put into dominos, stood in the background.

The slow opening strains of the Lohengrin wedding-march stole down from the gallery and there was a faint rustle from above. The hush became breathless. A moment later three figures appeared and stood on the high landing beneath the soft glow of the candles, into whose aspiring flames they seemed for a moment to merge as if to soar upward themselves. Pelham and Trowbridge, holding the candelabra aloft with rigid arms, looked like graven images. Gita, a white wraith, her arms hanging at her sides, her eyes fixed on space, but dazzling with their own light, stepped slowly down the wide stair, her attendants beside her. All three were consumed with fear of taking a false step and stumbling headlong, but preserved their outward composure.

A deep sigh rose from the audience, and one or two of the men whose secret life was ruled by a passionate devotion to beauty, winked away tears. Even the scornful muscles of Mrs. Pleyden's face relaxed, and she reflected that she would have a tale to tell on many morrows.

The music rose and swelled through the old hall. The torches seemed to flame higher, and the dark faces of Carterets stood out as saliently as the living members of the drama enacting below. The stately trio reached the foot of the stair and Eustace took Gita's hand and led

her forward, unmindful of Mr. Donald's crooked arm and heightened color. The bridesmaids spread out their trains and stepped daintily behind. The candelabra were lowered with a sigh of relief and Pelham advanced to his position as best man. The ceremony began.

Once Eustace felt Gita's hand twitch as if she would snatch it away, but he held it firmly. Dr. Lancaster had a deep solemn voice and it boomed out much as it had done at the funeral ceremonies eight months before. Gita shivered, but she uttered her vows firmly, and held out a rigid finger for the ring. Then she sank to her knees on the cushion thoughtfully provided by Topper, and set her teeth as the solemn blessing rolled over her head. A moment later she was on her feet again listening to a loud excited buzz of congratulations. She submitted to being kissed by Mrs. Pleyden and the girls, then broke away and ran toward the dining-room.

"If you are not all famished I am," she cried in a high and not unhysterical voice. "And you must lose no time drinking our health."

PART II

CHAPTER I

"Nothing and Nobody, By Elizabeth Pelham" was published in the spring, and as critics and columnists pronounced it another notable contribution to undiluted Americanism and as her publisher's enthusiasm expressed itself in picturesque advertising it had a fair success. The sale barely reached seven thousand copies, but the event established her in sophisticate society and the Lucy Stone League invited her to sit at the Speakers' Table at their annual dinner.

"But privately I don't think much of it," she said to Gita. "They are all very kind and overlook defects because it is modern and sincere and rather disagreeable. But I know I'll do better and better, and I never was so happy in my life."

"Eustace thinks it a remarkable first novel, and I know it by heart. Seems all right to me."

Elsie shook her head solemnly. "It has holes in it. But it is seeing your stuff in print that educates, not critics."

They were in Gita's sitting-room in the West Twelfth Street house, the windows open to the warm breezes of spring.

"How is Eustace's book getting on?" asked Elsie, who was still able to interest herself in the work of other authors. "It should be nearly finished."

"Haven't seen him for two weeks. He has his meals sent upstairs. Says he always becomes the complete hermit toward the end. I suppose he doesn't even shave."

Gita was smoking placidly and Elsie looked at her speculatively.

"Your experiment has been a success," she observed. "I wondered if it would——"

"Of course it has been a success. We've even had our little tiffs. Sometimes, particularly at the table, I feel almost domestic. But when we have an evening at home he comes downstairs to call and we have one of our old wonderful talks. The more I see of all these clever men the more I admire Eustace, for he has a mental grace that seems to be a sort of left-over and successfully eluded by the rest of them. I've missed him terribly these last weeks."

"Too bad more husbands don't take a leaf out of his book! In some ways your marriage is an ideal one."

"All ways."

"Well, of course all women wouldn't think so."

"More fools they."

"Gita——" Elsie hesitated. She seldom pressed too close to this still incalculable friend, but no artistic faculty would continue to function without curiosity. Moreover, she was still more interested personally in Gita than in anyone she had ever known, save, possibly, Eustace Bylant.

"Well?" Gita, who had returned at two in the morning from a party at Potts Dawes's, was sunken deep in her chair, enjoying the sensation of complete repose. She had lost some of her color, but her pink negligée shed a soft glow over her face that would have softened it as well had it not been for her hair, which, springing away from her face and very thick at the back, gave her, Elsie thought, the appearance of an eagle about to lift its wings and take flight. And her eyes, in spite

of her mild dissipations, never looked heavy, although less fierce than formerly.

Gita had ceased to fear men and found many of Eustace's friends as likable and amusing as she had anticipated. Whether a bride was sacrosanct even in a circle whose bugle-cry was scorn of tradition, or they cared for no reckoning with Bylant, or thought her too difficult game for a busy age, was a matter of indifference to her. They admired her extravagantly, but they let her alone. Once Peter Whiffle kissed her instep, but she had turned her eyes away from so much worse that she was inclined to be lenient and merely brushed him off as she would a mosquito. They discussed esoteric literature at odds with the censor for the rest of the evening.

"Gita——"

"Well—once more. You look as if you had something on your mind. Better get it off."

"I can't help wondering—I witnessed a good many changes before you married . . . but this winter in New York has changed you still more——"

"Developed, dear Elsie. You're careless in the use of words, for a stylist. We don't change, you know."

"Not literally perhaps—unless, to be sure, the endocrines go wrong. But it looks a good deal like it sometimes! Perhaps 'thawed' would be a better word still. I shouldn't be at all surprised to see you dancing next winter."

"I don't think so. There are some things I dislike as much as ever. Men are all very well as long as you don't get too close to them. Then they smell of gin. And—well, I shouldn't like it, that's all. Some of those men are all right but it takes just one cocktail to turn two or three I could mention into silly beasts. If I

danced with one I couldn't refuse any of them and then anything might happen. So far, I'm safe from all but stuttering compliments on my eyelashes or my ears."

Elsie laughed. "You're safe enough. And probably right. There isn't one of them, I fancy, who wouldn't like to take you away from Eustace, but they're afraid of you both. . . . But you *have* thawed, and you've become a good deal of a woman of the world; you've cast out a good many inhibitions and prejudices. You've got *used* to things. You even took Marian Starr Darsett for a drive the other day, and it is the particular pride of our sophisticates that she has had more lovers than any woman in the world for her age. You find her charming and you've grown as indifferent as the rest of us to conduct as long as the personality pleases you and jiggledy morals don't interfere with table manners."

"That's all true. I look upon life as a pageant and am grateful for its variety and not out to reform it. Miss Darsett is a beauty and a genius and a charming creature; and her private life—personal rather; nothing very private about it,—is her affair, not mine."

"But don't you see what a stride you've taken? Any hint of sex, even under the ægis of holy matrimony, utterly disgusted you. If Polly and I had been even the usual susceptible females, let alone Marian Darsetts, you'd have swept us out with a broom."

"True enough. But that was owing to a neurosis, and you and Polly and Eustace, my grandmother and the life she made possible, did the sweeping. I am able to adjust myself, take life as I find it, that's all."

"Well, it's a good deal! I'm wondering if you won't go further and fall in love with Eustace."

Gita stared at her. "With Eustace? What an idea! Why don't you ask me if I don't think of spoiling the

very most ideal—and satisfactory—relationship that ever existed between a man and woman?"

"Well—that's a matter of opinion."

"Only one opinion under this roof."

"Then you've changed—developed if you prefer it—less than I thought."

"Odd if I should change in that respect."

"Some women, you know, even women that have been inhibited for one reason or another. . . . You might fall in love with someone else. You've met a good many attractive men these last months."

"None half as attractive as Eustace. He always both rests and stimulates me and his manners are flawless. More than can be said for most."

"And do you mean to live like this for the rest of your life?"

"Of course. Why not? Life is perfect. When I look back on those long twenty-two years before I landed in Carteret Manor I can hardly realize my good luck."

"Oh, I admit that. And you were doubly fortunate to have the mental equipment to make the most of it. But you're missing something, you know."

"I'm not." Gita set her mouth obstinately. "Don't talk that old tosh."

"Call it what you like, but no woman escapes it. Even Polly is more than half in love with my brother."

"Is she?" Gita opened her eyes. "She's never said a word to me about it."

"Bad sign, as you see her nearly every day. He's been there to dine several times and I know they take walks together in the Park. I fancy the pursuit is on her side, but when a woman makes up her mind to marry a man she generally does."

"Funny if Polly went back on that old hard-and-fast

program of hers. And I don't quite see her as the wife of a struggling young surgeon."

"Nor I. But love has been known to do queer things to people. And Polly has the tenacity of the devil."

"I always said she was far too good for her crowd, and I've seen signs more than once she was sick of it. But—well, *but!*"

"Exactly. She'll blind herself and perhaps him for a time, but they're not suited at all."

"Have you given him a talking-to?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"I haven't seen him since the night of the Christmas party. Then he looked like a beau cavalier and was certainly devoted to Polly." She almost blushed as she remembered his explosive declaration to herself.

"I rather thought you'd made an impression on him," said Elsie. "And that wouldn't have done either. I suppose I don't want him to marry at all. He's the sort of man who is better off alone. Perhaps I'm all wrong. I'd be a fool if I thought I knew my own brother . . . I wish you'd ask them to dine and then tell me what you think of it."

"I've asked him several times but he always gave some excuse. When Eustace has finished his book we're going to have a celebration and I'll tell Polly to bring him."

"Well—if I were a different person, and you were a different person, I'd ask you to use your own wiles and break it up. But as it is——"

"I should think not!" Gita sprang to her feet. "Let's go for a walk."

CHAPTER II

EUSTACE, unshorn and unshaven, banged out the last word of his novel, tore the page from the typewriter and flung it to the floor. Then he hit his machine a blow with his fist, rattled the case over it, and swinging about in his chair, scowled at the scattered manuscript. He gave full rein to his temperament when writing a book in the seclusion of his chambers and bore little resemblance to the Eustace Bylant known to his world.

He had begun his novel in Atlantic City, but interruptions had been frequent and interests conflicting; he had confined himself to a rough draft, working only at night and not vitally interested. But he had plunged into it as a beneficent refuge the day after he found himself shut up in this narrow house with Gita; and as art had been his queen-mistress for so many years, she showed but a few days of coyness before remounting her throne. His theme had not only absorbed but exhausted him. A cold shower and he was ready to meet Gita at the table or sit with her in that austere living-room of hers during the evening with nerves that longed only for rest. They rarely met before dinner, for he rose at nine and worked until four, and on what he called his off-days he went to a gymnasium, played golf, or took a long walk in the country. This last week the pace had been terrific and he had barely left his rooms.

He hardly knew whether he loved his book or hated it. He always finished a novel with regret, and this

assuredly had been a friend in need! But his nerves were jumping and his violated ego clamored for utterance.

He gathered up the sheets resentfully. Why hadn't he spun it out? Made it a third longer? Even now he might pad it, dazzling both critics and public with pyrotechnical brilliancy. But he shrugged impatiently. He was an artist and incapable of crime. Perhaps he was more artist than man. He wished to God he were.

He took a hot bath and cold shower, and not daring to trust his unsteady hands, slipped out of the house and went to his barber. An hour later he was sauntering up Fifth Avenue to one of his clubs, cool, aloof, immaculately groomed, the frenetic artist submerged in the man of the world. This club, of which he was a member almost by inheritance, always called him at the end of an intellectual orgy. The reaction from the long strain was apt to be sharp and violent and it was some time before he cared even to lunch at The Sign of the Indian Chief, where the sophisticates foregathered and had created something resembling a salon. A woman novelist once told him that as soon as she finished a book she hastily adjusted her feminine wings and flew to the shops. His reaction was not dissimilar and he moved automatically toward men who hardly knew him as a novelist and were quietly amused by the word temperament.

At half-past seven he met Gita in the Brittany drawing-room and gallantly raised her hand to his lips.

"I feel as if I had just risen from the dead," he said, smiling, "and had ascended not to earth but to a vision of paradise."

"Nice to hear your pretty compliments again, dear Eustace, and nicer still to have you back. But you look rather fagged—must have been working frightfully hard."

"Pegging away like an old cart-horse, but the job's finished, thank heaven. A week or two of polishing and then nothing more arduous than proofs to correct."

"I'd love to help you with them."

"Well, you shall. We'll be over at the manor then and I'll really see something of you once more. Have we anything on tonight?"

"Music at the Pleydens'. I hope you're not too tired to go? I dared not accept for dinner but promised Mrs. Pleyden I'd bring you later if it were humanly possible."

His sigh of relief was inaudible. He meant to woo her and win her but he was very tired and a part of his brain still reverberated to the echoes of his creative energies. "Nothing would give me more pleasure than an evening of music except to dine alone with you and enjoy a good dinner once more. By the time a tray reaches the third floor things are lukewarm and tasteless. Shall we go in?"

The long narrow dining-room was at the front of the house, rather somber, with its tapestries and Jacobean furniture, but lit with long red candles as slender as reeds. Topper had been left in charge of the manor and they were served by a trim maid. Gita, at the head of the table in a shining yellow gown with a jeweled sunflower (Bylant's wedding-gift) at her breast, was a grateful and refreshing figure after his incarceration, and he felt as he would toward any beautiful woman who had never stirred his pulses; although they talked of intimate things. Gita purred like a contented house-cat restored to the warmth of the hearthstone, her eyes dwelling affectionately on the bland and hungry gentleman opposite.

"You've no idea how I've missed you!" she exclaimed

as their eyes met and smiled. "But of course you forgot my existence."

"Ah—well, I must be rude and confess that I did. But I am sure you understand."

"Of course I do. And I never resented it even when I wanted to talk to you more than anything else in the world."

"I once told you that you would make a model wife—and, I remember, you retorted that you hated the word, and substituted partner."

"Oh, I'm used to hearing myself called your wife and don't mind a bit. Words only mean what you put into them, anyhow. To most foreigners, for instance, all our words mean nothing."

"Quite true. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Lunching with Polly at some restaurant in Park Avenue or with Elsie at The Sign of the Indian Chief, or with both of them here; going to the opera, matinées, concerts, parties, dinners, walking, shopping—getting summer things—enjoying myself every minute."

"Not a bit tired of this gay life?"

"Rather not. But I'll be glad to get back to the manor."

"I suppose you intend to have house-parties?"

"I should think so! Dozens have promised to come."

"Wouldn't you like to be quiet for a while?"

Gita shook her head. "No, and you wouldn't, either. You never look as much at home as at a party."

"But it would be a delightful change to have you to myself for a bit—say a month."

" 'Fraid we'd get talked out and bore each other, but a week between each party would strike a happy medium.

I never intend to give you a chance to tire of me." And she gave him a dazzling smile.

He made the proper gallant retort, and asked, "What time do we show up at the Pleydens'?"

"Ten-thirty. You've just time for a cigar in my ark. I simply long to see you in your chair again. It's over a fortnight since you paid me a call."

CHAPTER III

THE Pleydens lived in a double apartment on Park Avenue and until lately the large drawing-room had resounded with jazz at least once a week. During the winter Mrs. Pleyden gave two musical evenings, a large dinner once a fortnight, followed by bridge, and numerous luncheons. She had no intention of retiring to a backwater, and Polly, to do her justice, never demanded the ignominy and even asked a few of her friends to the concerts.

Tonight, although it was late in the season, a large company was assembled, and several of the women wore tiaras—less ponderous than Gita's heirloom, however—supported their chins with high diamond collars, and clung to the elaborate coiffure of the past; but others, like Mrs. Pleyden—still in her forties despite two married daughters—covered their ears, indulged in a permanent wave, or arranged their hair in the manner best suited to their individual style.

Mrs. Pleyden wore a jeweled band above her eyebrows, and her gown of eucalyptus-green satin embroidered with silver finished eight inches above the instep and was as modish as Polly's. A short string of pearls clasped the base of her throat, and at the end of a long chain of platinum and small diamonds she carried a lorgnette. Her eyes were still clear and bright but growing defective in vision, and although lorgnettes were no longer employed to annihilate they were useful for casual print.

Her concerts were always events, for she had the fine

taste in music of educated New Yorkers, and a liberal understanding with stars of the opera and concert stage. The musicians performed on a raised dais at the end of the long room, and the guests sat as comfortably as might be on rows of gilt chairs. The decorations were yellow chrysanthemums, and a soft golden light was becoming to complexions both sacred and profane. Mr. Pleyden was not present. He was the able and industrious president of a railroad system and spent his evenings in his library reading detective stories.

But Mrs. Pleyden looked less placid than usual as she stood by the door receiving late guests while a coloratura warbled. Her eyes wandered to Polly, who sat in a niche by the chimneypiece with Dr. Pelham. Her brilliant restless daughter merely blew rings in her face when, forgetting diplomacy, she remonstrated or probed lightly; and refused to discuss the subject. Mrs. Pleyden was not as worldly as the mothers of her own youth but she drew the line at obscure surgeons whose parents she had never met. That he was the highly esteemed associate of Dr. Gaunt, whose mother wore a tiara in the front row, and whose wife was her intimate friend, in no way tempered the misfortune that threatened the house of Pleyden. He might be a famous surgeon himself twenty years hence but at present he was a nobody; and although girls sometimes married young men obliged to toil and economize, and were content to live in unfashionable neighborhoods, saved from complete ignominy by one servant, it was always with a husband of their own class, and their position was still as assured as that of their friends with spectacular American incomes. But Mrs. Pleyden had seen enough of Geoffrey Pelham to comprehend that if Polly married him she would drop out. It was only too plain that society bored

him, and if her dainty and fastidious daughter accomplished what looked to be a fell purpose her flat in the Bronx would be as disconcerting to her old friends as that dreadful house on States Avenue, Atlantic City. Her father would be willing to give her a large allowance, but Pelham was not the man to live on his wife, and she knew that he contributed to the support of his mother and sister. The future looked dark and dubious. She had seen Polly interested before but never serious.

And then she noticed that Pelham, whose ear was bent to Polly's irreverent whisperings, was looking at Gita Bylant. Staring at her. His eyes looked bedazzled. She was convinced that he had not yet asked Polly to marry him, and although he was obviously attracted by her, he had never, to Mrs. Pleyden's experienced eye, given the impression of a man desperately in love. She had concluded that the pursuit was Polly's, but it was a conclusion that had given her little solace. Polly was born to have her way.

But at this moment her heart gave a throb of mingled hope and resentment. Although she disapproved of Gita more than ever, since that refractory charge preferred the society of what her own set persisted in calling bohemians, to the exalted circles into which, true to her promise, she had launched her, the creature might have her uses; and if she chose to exert her wiles on Geoffrey Pelham, so much the better.

Eustace was able to take care of himself.

But Gita, after a smile and nod to both Polly and Dr. Pelham, had devoted herself raptly to the music.

The musical program lasted but an hour and a half. As the company moved toward the dining-room Gita found herself beside Geoffrey Pelham, who had surrendered Polly to Park Leonard, a new and increasingly

determined admirer. Gita noted under her eyelashes that he more nearly filled Polly's old ideal than any of her numerous court, certainly far more than Geoffrey Pelham. He was a partner in his father's eminent law firm, and in spite of a personal fortune, was ambitious, active and diligent, going rarely into society and never to jazz parties. He had met Polly at a dinner to which he had been enticed by his sister, and his attentions, at first sporadic, had of late grown assiduous. He had dark hair and gray eyes, clean features almost sharp, and a square chin. His devotion to the law in no way interfered with his grooming, and as he took quiet possession of Polly it would have been difficult to find a couple so at one in breeding and so complementary in looks.

Polly found him useful as a red rag, and nodded indifferently to Pelham as she gave Leonard permission to sit beside her at supper. That Gita's black eyes had played havoc in Geoffrey's unsusceptible heart had never entered her mind.

CHAPTER IV

Gita had learned the lesson familiar to all American women, that conversational initiative was one to be cheerfully assumed, more particularly with men as silent as Geoffrey Pelham. She began by reproaching him for his neglect.

"I've been working very hard," he replied, avoiding her eyes.

"But Eustace! He's devoted to you and has felt hurt. You might have made an exception in his favor. Do you really go nowhere?"

"I won't say that. I couldn't very well, as I'm here tonight! Dr. Gaunt insists that society is the best relaxation for a busy man, although I don't agree with him, but I do go out now and then. It just happened I could not accept any of your invitations."

"Well! You'll come to our party a week from Thursday. Eustace has finished his novel and we're going to have a blow-out. Don't try to think up an excuse. We'll expect you."

"I was only trying to say I'd be delighted."

They found a table for two in a corner, and although surrounded by high chatter their tête-à-tête was unlikely to be interrupted.

Gita was still uninitiated in coquetry but her eyes as she turned them on Pelham were not devoid of challenge, although she was, at the moment, consumed by nothing more dangerous than curiosity.

"I hear you are devoted to Polly," she remarked.

He flushed but answered coolly: "Devoted is hardly the word. I have a great admiration for Miss Pleyden and she has shown me much hospitality. I—I've never found time to be interested in anyone."

"Polly has more in her than you suspect. She is not only a dear but she really has a mind if she would cultivate it."

"I more than suspect it. As I told you before I find her admirable."

"I was delighted when I heard of the friendship. I've always feared she'd marry some duffer and come to her senses too late."

"I should say she was less likely to make a mistake than most girls, and Leonard, for instance, is a fine fellow."

Gita glanced across the room at Polly, whose flower-like orbs were lifted sweetly to the compelling gaze of the distinguished young lawyer.

"He'd do very well," she said musingly. "Polly always said she'd never marry until she met a man of that sort." She shot a glance at Pelham, who was calmly consuming a plover.

"I'm sure she couldn't do better."

"But——" If Polly were as serious as Elsie suspected was it not her loyal duty to aid her in what might be the supreme crisis of her youth? No doubt Pelham was in love with her without realizing it, so scant was his experience with women.

"Well?" Pelham looked up, and in his own eyes there was something of challenge.

"I mean—well—you see—I hardly know how to say it, but I believe Polly is really interested in you."

"I have amused her because I am a rank outsider, something entirely different from what she has been ac-

customed to." And he helped himself to chicken salad.

Gita was torn between what might be a betrayal of Polly and the desire to come to her assistance. She had heard that men sometimes needed but a seed deftly planted to be flattered into complete surrender. And Pelham was not the type to feel only the joy of the hunter. Affection for Polly conquered.

"I believe she is really in love with you," she said.

He turned pale but looked at her steadily. "If I thought that were true I should refuse to discuss the subject at all. But it is not. . . . Am I to understand that you have turned matchmaker?"

"Not I. But I'd like to see Polly happy."

"Do you mean that you want me to marry her?" His voice had a harsh directness, quite unlike the mellow subtle tones of Eustace Bylant.

To her surprise Gita felt her face flush, and she dropped her eyes.

"Yes—I think I do." But she frowned, not at him but herself.

"I never saw but one woman I wanted to marry and as—that is forever denied me I shall never marry at all. I'm not the sort of man, I hope, to make love to the wife of my friend, but—I'd be grateful if you would take no further interest in my casual friendships with other women." He was very white but his voice was hard and deliberate and his eyes angry. He lifted his fork and his sensitive fingers were steady.

Gita turned cold and the blood left her face and seemed to settle about her heart, whose thumping stirred the sunflower on her breast. She was astounded and horrified—and not at Geoffrey Pelham! And then she felt a sensation of sheer terror. What had happened to her? Of love in the sexual sense she was incapable and

she assuredly felt for this man none of the calm active affection she so liberally bestowed on Eustace and her two other friends. She was barely conscious of liking him, although he had haunted her thoughts occasionally and had given her an odd sensation the night of the Christmas party. She had heard a great deal of the magnetic vibrations between men and women, inspired by nothing more elevated than the automatic response of the opposite poles of sex, but she was far removed from that category. She had lived in an atmosphere of sex since she came to New York and its vibrations had glanced off her as harmlessly as lightning from basalt. If she no longer regarded the subject with profound distaste she was totally uninterested. Eustace had taught her that men could be clean and decent and wholly admirable, and as a rule she chose to see only the fine side of the others and viewed their moral divagations with indifference.

She dropped her handkerchief on the side farthest from Pelham and bent down until the blood returned to her head, then switched on her analytical faculty. She had been startled—who would not be? Geoffrey Pelham!—and horrified that she was the innocent cause of desolation in two hearts capable of the highest happiness. Polly was doomed to bitter disappointment, and this honorable and remarkable man would go through life a dreary bachelor for her sake. (She was unable to visualize Polly as an old maid.) She felt Jezebelian. And loyalty flooded her for Eustace. For the moment she was almost angry at the man whose life she had unwittingly ruined, and craned her neck until her eyes found her husband, seated at a distant table, laughing and talking with every appearance of enjoyment. She caught his eye and they exchanged a glance of gay understanding which

suffused her with a virtuous glow and enabled her to turn to Geoffrey, now at work on a peach. She said calmly:

"That was an awkward silence but you frightened me out of my wits. Will you peel me a peach? It's a pleasure to watch you. And when I eat a hothouse peach in winter I feel as if I had dissolved a pearl in champagne—although Cleopatra's wines must have been stronger than bootleggers'."

CHAPTER V

It was Mrs. Pleyden's habit to move to Atlantic City in April and she began her usual preparations on the day after the party in spite of remonstrances from Polly.

"I'm sick to death of Atlantic City and besides I hear they're having a rainy spring. I've a lot of things on here and simply can't go."

She was lying on a sofa in her mother's bedroom and wore a pale green negligée in delicate harmony with the pink of her cheeks, unimpaired by a cacophonous winter. As usual she was smoking.

Mrs. Pleyden, who was packing her jewels for the safe-deposit vault in her bank, looked up critically.

"I wish you would not smoke so much, if only for the sake of your complexion. The house in Chelsea is ready and the servants go tomorrow. I am surprised you made any engagements."

"I don't think I'll go," announced Polly. "I can stay here with father. He told me yesterday he'd be delighted to have me, and if he can make himself comfortable with two servants and a caretaker I can."

Mrs. Pleyden bent over the large box with an anxious line between her brows. It was seldom she came to an issue with her daughter.

"But—my dear—you would have a dull time. All the girls will have left shortly, either for Europe or the country—I dislike Europe since the war but if you'd like to go——"

"I shouldn't."

"Even before your friends left you couldn't have parties. I don't mean only in my absence but in that of the servants."

"I'm sick of parties. I only want to be quiet for a while. Nothing very quiet about Atlantic City."

"I am afraid, my dear, you have another reason. You want to be able to continue to see Dr. Pelham."

"Well—what if I do? He's the only man that interests me—makes me feel as if I had brains instead of jazz in my skull."

"He's an intellectual man, of course, and if he ever talks at all, no doubt what he says is illuminating. But aren't you rather young for intellectual friendships? Better enjoy yourself while you *are* young and leave those until later. Besides, how about Park Leonard? I should think he was quite as clever as Dr. Pelham and a good deal more versatile. Certainly more your own sort."

"I like him well enough but I happen to like Geoffrey Pelham better. He interests me and Park does not. Those things are not to be explained. Matter of spark, perhaps."

"Isn't it merely because he is rather difficult? You are used to having men fall in love with you, pursue you as Leonard does."

"Maybe. What does it matter?"

Mrs. Pleyden abandoned diplomacy. It had come to what Polly herself would call a show-down.

"Do you intend to marry him?" she asked.

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"Have you thought what it means?"

"Financially? A flat in Harlem or the Bronx or commuting to some—at present—unknown suburb? Yes, I've thought of it—considerably. But if Nell Croydon and Hallie Le Kay can stand it I guess I can. Besides, I always like anything for a change! And in a

few years he'll have a large income. Dr. Gaunt told me the other day that his personal practice was increasing rapidly, and of course he has his associate fees."

"Very well. If you are able to see yourself living—with resignation—in an uptown flat or suburban cottage, changing an incompetent servant at least once a month and making over your clothes, cut off from everything to which you have been accustomed, and with a man who hardly opens his mouth, I have nothing to say. But are you sure he is in love with you?"

"No, I am not, and that is what makes it exciting. I rather like doing all the work for a change. Waking him up. And don't you imagine he never talks. He's bored stiff at dinners, and that he comes at all means a good deal; but when we take walks together he opens up, and sometimes is almost boyish."

"Ah. You are sure you can make him love you?"

"I am," said Polly serenely. "Just you wait."

"And"—Mrs. Pleyden took another plunge—"has it never occurred to you that he might love someone else?"

Polly sat up straight, dropping her cigarette. "What on earth put such an idea into your head?"

"Please pick up that cigarette before it burns a hole in the rug. I mean he is in love with Gita Carteret."

Polly rose slowly to her feet, her eyes staring. "Mother! What are you saying?"

"I know what I am talking about. I saw him looking at her last night when he was pretending to listen to you. No man looks at a woman like that unless he loves her. And I watched them afterward in the dining-room. He said something that made her turn as white as a sheet and she didn't speak for at least five minutes. It seems he's not only in love with her but is not above making love to the wife of his best friend."

"I don't believe it! You imagined it—every bit of it! In the first place he wouldn't do such a thing and in the second he wouldn't dare. You don't know Gita as I do. She'd have thrown a plate at him."

"It is fortunate that her evident complaisance—reciprocation, shall I say?—averted a scandal. For unless all signs fail she's in love with him."

"You're crazy. You hate Gita and you don't like Geoffrey. You've let your imagination run away with you. That's all."

"Have I ever struck you as an imaginative woman? I doubt if there's a more practical woman in New York. And I don't hate Gita, although I disapprove of her, and was only too thankful when poor dear Eustace took her off my hands. A pleasant prospect for him!"

"You needn't worry. Neither would do anything dishonorable even if there were anything in it, and there's not. If you didn't imagine it all you were mistaken."

"Has he never talked to you about her?"

Polly raked her memory. "Yes—I suppose he has. It's quite the thing to discuss Gita."

"Hasn't he talked of her a good deal? May not that be one secret of your attraction for him?"

"You are not very complimentary!"

"I don't mean, my dear, that you couldn't charm anyone you thought worth while, whether you let him talk to you about some other girl or not. I am merely trying to open your eyes."

"Well, I'll not believe it," said Polly stubbornly. She was walking up and down the room, her eyes puzzled and angry. "But I'll sound out Gita this very day. And warn her off the grass if I find she's been flirting with him. She's come out of her 'fort' to such an amazing extent this winter and has got so accustomed to men

raving over her that no doubt she's as keen as the next girl to stir a man up——"

"Do you believe that Gita is incapable of falling in love?"

"Yes, I do. When I first met her I got the impression she was just the sort to burn herself up over some man, but I know better now. No one could call her subnormal, but she's what is known as asexual. Shell's all right but emotional content gone fluey. Do you know that she doesn't live with Eustace? That they had an understanding to that effect?"

Mrs. Pleyden blushed slightly. "I inferred as much, but it cannot last."

"Not with anyone but Gita. Perhaps not forever even with her. Time works wonders even to one's inside. But no one but Eustace will turn the trick. He's the man for her in every way and she really adores him in her own queer fashion. She'll never give ten cents for Geoffrey Pelham nor anyone else."

"I'm not so sure. She is Gerald Carteret's daughter, and the living image of him. Nor were the Carteret women, although their virtue was proverbial, ever known as what you call asexual. The men were lawless, and Gita strikes me as more like them than like the women of her family. And although she started out in life by hating men you can see for yourself how she's changed. Nothing she did would surprise me. You know how high-handed she is. What she wants she will have——"

"No more high-handed than I am. You forget this is the age of high-handedness. What we want we'll damn well get. And the devil take the hindmost. Well, I'm off to dress."

CHAPTER VI

GITA was only half-dressed when she heard Polly's voice downstairs. She had not slept until long after daylight. To her intense annoyance and perplexity her mind iterated and reiterated the scene between herself and Geoffrey Pelham. As a rule she fell asleep the moment she turned off the light, no matter how exciting the preceding hours may have been, and she looked upon Pelham almost with awe that he could disturb the habit of a lifetime. Even the ugly worries and agitations of the past had never interfered with sound healthy nights.

The moment she was encompassed by darkness she had been back in the Pleyden dining-room with Geoffrey Pelham's voice in her ears, her eyes on his white strained face until she dropped them in consternation. She supposed that another woman, recalling a declaration from a man as attractive as that would have thrilled at the haunting memory; but her body was quiescent, it was only her brain that blazed like a bonfire. . . . She was not even sure he had captured her imagination, he had merely "started something." . . .

No doubt her vanity. . . . But she had had a good many spasms of vanity this last year. She had been inordinately set up when she had made a conquest of Eustace Bylant. . . . Her mirror had received a good many confidences. Yes, she was as vain as a peacock. No need of a man more or less to keep it awake. Certainly wouldn't keep her awake. . . .

She recalled the night of the manor ball when she and

Pelham had sat alone in the drawing-room. He had outshone every man at the party in looks and distinction. . . . She remembered certain odd sensations. . . . Another Gita Carteret. That was it. No doubt if she had sat in that room two hundred years ago with a young man as handsome and winning as that she'd have fallen in love with him then and there. For the first time she was conscious of regret that such an exciting experience was denied her. It would be immeasurably interesting to love a man like Geoffrey Pelham—especially as he looked that night. Nothing very romantic about a man dressed like a waiter and eating chicken salad. . . .

That, perhaps, was it. Romance. It was not the dearth of sex-fires she was regretting—that idea was as abhorrent as ever—but the romances all those beautiful Carteret girls had experienced before her and handed down as her birthright. She would even have been glad if her mother—who would have been happier dead anyhow—could have gone when she was a child and her father had sent her to her grandmother. She would have grown up a true Carteret girl and come into her birthright. She might or might not have met Geoffrey Pelham but she would have had her romance sooner or later. . . . But no, she had met a good many men now, some of them charming and congenial enough. It would have been Geoffrey Pelham and no other. Perhaps they were both living again after two hundred years' sleep and had once met and loved in that old manor. There had been something oddly *aware* that night—but that was nonsense. She might be too educated to assume that anything, including reincarnation, was fabulous, but she didn't believe it all the same. It was merely the law of mutual attraction at work. Men and women were falling in love every day all over the world with no as-

sistance from metempsychosis. . . . And she was by no means "in love." Silly phrase. Moronotic. . . . What might have been and what was were two entirely different matters. It was merely that some subtle magnetic quality in his personality suggested romance—every girl's birthright—or had that night. There was nothing very romantic about a surgeon always carving up people and getting blood all over himself . . . and they had to cut up corpses before they could do that, and hardly ever read anything but stiff medical journals.

. . . Still he did and that was the end of it. When that set grimness left his face it looked sensitive and eager, almost boyish . . . and no doubt he could be ardent enough. He was boxed up—had been—would have to be now more than ever if he loved her as much as he thought he did. She gave a sigh of pity. Poor devil. Why had he lit on her of all girls? Polly was—— But she turned her thoughts away from Polly.

And Eustace. If she had grown up at Carteret Manor she never would have married Eustace; she'd have taken him on as a brother. He wouldn't have done for a hero of romance at all, perfectly delightful as he was in so many ways. Odd, too. He and Geoffrey were not unlike. Both were fair, had much the same compact tall figures, both intellectual and the product of their times. Perhaps they both belonged to what Polly would call her "type," and it was just that subtle difference that made Geoffrey romantic (in costume) and Eustace prosaic. Costume certainly didn't improve *him.* He'd looked simply awful as old Cornbury. . . . It was nice to be married to dear Eustace. Not for a moment could she regret it. What use? No romance for her. But it was exciting to imagine what it would have been like if she had been one of those other Gita Carterets. She couldn't even feel sad

over it—too much of a philosopher, no doubt. She felt more like the heroine of a play—acting someone else's lines but feeling the real thing for the moment. . . .

No wonder she had been upset at that very real declaration in that very prosaic dining-room. . . . Horribly upset. Thought she was going to faint. . . . Odd, though, she hadn't felt . . . what was it. . . . What. . . . She yawned prodigiously and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

When Polly entered she was standing before the long mirror of the dressing-table in her yellow bedroom, brushing her hair back and up. She liked the springing effect it gave her head, as if she were about to leap upward and fly, and she was full of vanity and had forgotten Geoffrey Pelham.

"Hullo, Polly darling," she exclaimed. "You look as fresh as if you'd gone to bed at nine last night. I'm disgracefully lazy. I'll be glad to get back to the manor and go to bed at a decent hour once more."

"I'm tired of late hours, myself." Polly adjusted her flexible spine to a comfortable chair and lit a cigarette. She wore a red gown and had painted her lips to match.

Gita smiled sympathetically. "Your mother told me she's going to Atlantic City this week, but I hope you don't mean to go before the party. You could stay here and sleep on that day-bed."

"No, thanks. I lay down on it once! I'm not going with mother. Dad always keeps the apartment open and I'll stay with him for a while."

"Good! We leave in about ten days and it will be heavenly to have you here. I suppose you'll be going about the same time?"

"I may stay here all summer."

Gita, who had looked like a boy once more in her silk union suit, slipped a negligée of ivory-white silk and lace over her head and shook it down. "You made me get these things," she grumbled. "I always feel rather

a fool in them. What on earth are you staying in town all summer for? You'll pass out with the heat."

"You can always be comfortable in New York in summer if you stay in the house all day and live in north rooms. It just occurred to me I'd like a change."

"It will be a change, all right." Gita stretched herself on the despised day-bed and stuffed a cushion under her head. "Won't you be bored to death?"

"Not while there's a man in the offing."

"Park Leonard?"

"No. Geoffrey Pelham."

Gita, prepared, did not change countenance. "Interesting man, rather, but it seemed to me last night that Mr. Leonard exactly fitted into that old program of yours."

"Forget what it was. Might have filled the bill once but Geoffrey Pelham is unique in my experience, and that suits me better."

The girls' eyes did not clash but met calmly.

"Well, you always get what you want, Polly dear," said Gita, and felt an inclination to strangle her.

Polly blew a ring. "Mother said you flirted desperately with Geoffrey last night."

"I!" Gita's spine rose as if propelled by a spring. "I never flirted in my life and you know it."

"I told her she was crazy, but she will have it that you have lost your heart at last."

Gita gasped. "Lost my heart? I feel as if I were turning pea-green. It's enough to make a dog sick."

"So it is. You may be sure she didn't convince me. If you ever did anything so commonplace we'd all be horribly disappointed. Now, you're the one and only Gita. . . . But—do you know?—I think you've rather grown to like admiration, and are not above encouraging it."

Gita shrugged and settled back to her pillow. "I'm vain enough. I even put cold cream on my face at night before I wash it. But I don't flirt and I don't encourage them. Just let them yap to their hearts' content."

"But do tell me that you think Geoffrey interesting," cried Polly, still angling. "I'd be frightfully disappointed if you didn't."

"Yes—I'd call him interesting. He doesn't say much, but he has a quality—magnetism, I suppose. And then he's rather unsusceptible and that's always intriguing. Glad he's fallen in love with you if you want him." Her conscience suddenly pricked. "By the way, he spoke of you with the greatest enthusiasm last night."

"Did he?" Polly seldom blushed but she did now and her eyes sparkled. "What did he say?"

"Oh, a lot of things. Different. More admirable than all other girls rolled into one. Almost warmed up." Gita had a very vague remembrance of what Geoffrey had said about Polly.

"Well, he ought to know something about me. We've seen enough of each other."

"Are you really in love with him?" Gita infused her tones with warm interest.

"I have a queer feeling I am. I don't like it very much. He's not at all the sort of man I expected to marry, and it will be horrid to be poor—although I bluffed it out to mother just now. But—well—those things happen."

"Don't they! But I don't quite get it. You don't seem to fit the picture somehow. Sure you're not deluding yourself? Novelty does wonders."

"Don't think I am. Got a queer feeling I never had before. Thrills and all that. Turn hot and cold. Lose my breath. Stay awake nights thinking about it. Dr.

Pelham—at a time when I was still calling him that—told me that love in our sex was an over-secretion of hormones in interstitial cells adjacent to the Graafian follicles; stimulation induced by powerful photographic image of someone of the opposite sex on the mental lens, which responds to certain old memories in the subconscious. Makes me fearfully set up to be anything as scientific as that, but I fancy I'd feel about the same anyway. Only hope the sub won't find it's mistaken and go into retreat when I'm living in Harlem and marketing on Sixth Avenue of a morning."

"And you really don't think it will?"

"No, I don't!" Polly suddenly became serious. "Oh, yes, I really don't. It would be wonderful to make a man like that happy. Grow with him. Really amount to something. I shouldn't mind being poor for a few years."

Gita was appalled (albeit conscious of conflicting emotions underneath). She knew how little likely was Polly to realize her potentialities if she depended upon Geoffrey Pelham. For the moment she hated herself and him. What blind idiots men were.

To give herself time to think she went into her "ark" to get a cigarette. She cared little for smoking but a cigarette had its uses.

. . . If she really had any influence over him couldn't she manage to steer him to Polly? He knew that his love for herself was hopeless and any man who made the mistake of falling in love with the wrong woman must come to his senses in time. Men were always falling in love with the wrong woman, getting over it, married, became fatuous fathers, and increased complacently in girth. Love was nothing but a superstition anyway. . . . Geoffrey was no fool to moon over one woman all his life.

Besides, there was always the rebound if a sufficiently charming woman who wanted him was on the alert. . . . She wished she'd had more experience. Pretty delicate. She'd have to watch her chance; and also watch out.

She returned to the day-bed, and exclaimed with enthusiasm: "It would be perfectly splendid, Polly. You'd bring each other out. I've always believed that all you needed was to fall in love with a really fine man and I was always afraid you wouldn't."

Her eyes glowed with affection and Polly responded with a quick smile, wholly reassured. She'd been a brute to doubt Gita, and as a matter of fact she hadn't. Her mother had stirred her up, thrown a wrench into her well-oiled mental machinery. That was all. Dear Gita.

Her face fell a little. "I'll confide to you I don't think he cares for me yet. I'm merely educating him up to it. That is the reason I'm staying on in town. Hope he'll realize in time that I'm all in all." Her tones were flippant again. "It takes an earthquake to wake some men up."

"Why don't you break your leg and then he'd not only set it but call daily and feel so sympathetic he'd find out right off he loved you. Pity for a beautiful frail helpless creature, bravely suffering, would turn the trick with any man not a stone, and you look lovely in bed."

"That sounds almost romantic from you! No. It wouldn't work. Mother would call in Dr. Gaunt and not let Geoffrey through the front door. But time is all I need and I mean to take it."

"Atlantic City won't be the same without you. I shall miss you terribly." The words were automatic. Her mind was racing.

Polly rose and snapped her vanity-box. "If I pull it off

sooner than I expect I'll leave town in a hurry. I long for salt water and long rides and a game of tennis. I suppose Geoffrey takes a vacation like other men and he could spend it in Atlantic City, to say nothing of week-ends. You're the best pal in the world and you've bucked me up. Had a séance with mother and was feeling down and out. When is the party?"

"Week from tomorrow."

"I'll be here with bells on. Don't come down. You look tired, and if you find that ancient relic comfortable—— Bye-bye." And she ran down the stair.

CHAPTER VIII

For some time after Polly's departure Gita lay still, with her brows drawn together. Her usually clear brain felt chaotic. A dog in the manger? Nice rôle for her. She couldn't have—didn't want—Geoffrey Pelham. Why had she alternated sympathy and noble resolutions with a desire to tear Polly's eyes out?

And she was really devoted to Polly—hadn't even ceased to love her when she'd felt like flinging the truth in her face. . . . Vanity? No . . . something else. . . . Her brain began to flash once more. Geoffrey Pelham loved her and that in a way made him hers. Her sense of possession was outraged. It was as if Polly had made off with her best seventeenth-century sunflower chest. . . .

Well, not exactly, perhaps. If she hadn't inherited the essential endowment of her lady ancestresses she'd found room somewhere for a few female characteristics. Must have been lurking even when she thought she'd turned herself into a boy. She had a moment of poignant regret for the complete loss of that old manufactured—and protective—self. Pity they hadn't let her alone. This mess wouldn't have come about.

She shook her head. No intention of fooling herself. Life had been too pleasant and full of surprises since Elsie took her in hand. After all, what she had wanted was drama, and she seemed in a fair way to get it—although one act was over. But it was something to have been kept awake by a man and to have inspired a hopeless

passion. Also quite a new sensation to want to strangle one of her three best friends.

She sprang to her feet. "Damn fools, all of us. And I'm no better than the rest."

She tore off her negligée and hurried into a tweed suit and thick shoes. Problems always sent her on a long walk.

CHAPTER IX

When she returned she found Eustace smoking in what she called her ark. He rose with a curtsey as yet unsubmerged by domesticity and shook hands with her.

"Your cheeks are as red as pippins," he said. "Been having a tramp?"

"Up to Harlem and back. Polly is going to marry Dr. Pelham and may have to live there. Thought I'd see what it looks like."

She flung her hat on the floor, ruffled her hair, and threw herself into an easy chair. Eustace was staring.

"Polly and Geoff—— I don't grasp it. You must be mistaken."

"You mustn't breathe it. But legally we are one, and there's no harm in telling you. I think it's serious with both." She had no intention of betraying Polly further, but the desire to talk of the momentous possibility was irresistible and Eustace was safe.

" 'Legally we are one.' " He repeated the words automatically; then recovered himself and drew on his pipe. "I never heard of a more brilliant example of mismating. Last about a year, I should think."

"You don't know Polly. She can be anything she likes. And love does wonders."

"Oh!" He almost dropped his pipe. "That's an odd statement to come from you. What do you know about it?"

"My mind works. And I've seen a good deal of life, first and last."

"Possibly. But the word 'love' sounds queer on your lips. And I don't believe it's anything but a word to you. I doubt if you have any conception of the meaning of it."

He watched her intently. Most of her old inhibitions and prejudices had dissolved. She was more adaptable, more tolerant, more responsive, more what she might have been had destiny been kinder. But how deeply had the new life changed her? She was remarkably like the old Gita still.

She looked at him with a brilliant smile. "Some stylists say you should never use a long word when a short one will serve, nor a derivative if you can find a Saxon. Don't agree with them, as I've always thought Swinburne's 'Chastelard' as cold and dry as a bone. But hack words are convenient, that's all, though one may be bored to death with them. I wonder the word 'love' has any meaning left in it. You're so clever, I should think you'd invent a new vocabulary."

"I write to be read. . . . I remember you once said that love was merely preference raised to a higher degree than like. But as your experience has grown perhaps you are willing to admit there are different degrees in the temperature of love itself?"

"Looks like it." Gita drew her black brows together. "I merely accept the fact because I have to."

Bylant had laid down his pipe and was twisting his short pointed beard. He eyed her speculatively, but not coldly. She looked warm and rosy and alluring in the deep chair, with her tumbled hair and bright eyes, and he would have given his new novel to kiss her; he half believed the time of his probation was shrinking. He had intended to wait for the woods and summer, but there was no harm in putting out an antenna or two.

"Don't you ever feel you're missing something?" he asked.

"I? What? Oh, you mean because I can't make a fool of myself like other women. No, I don't." But she blushed unaccountably.

Eustace interpreted the blush as an uneasy response to a fact long ignored. "Gita!" he exclaimed, suddenly illuminated by a brilliant idea. "Let's play a game. We can't discuss intellectual subjects forever. We'd dry up. It's time to strike a lighter note. Suppose we pretend we are not married and I've come wooing. And you are rather interested, but uncertain; willing to lead me on; curious to see if I could make an impression on your hard little heart. Pretty certain you'll throw me over, but curious enough to give me a chance."

Gita stared at him with mouth open. "What a perfectly ridiculous idea!"

"Not at all. Scientific matrimony. A science more married people would do well to study, and the keynote is variety. Besides, I've been working so long I feel in the mood for play."

Gita dug the toe of her boot into the rug. "I don't think I could play up. You see, I know I couldn't fall in love with you."

Bylant turned cold, but he answered steadily: "It would be a part of your end of the game to make yourself think you might. You have imagination, if you would consent to use it. You're not nearly so matter-of-fact as you like to think."

"I'm no actress, anyhow."

"Every woman is an actress. As safe to bet on as that no woman knows the sort of man she'll fall in love with. Look at Polly. Love, for that matter, is often due to the planting of a suggestion on one side or the other."

"Polly says Dr. Pelham told her that love is—— Oh, lord! Can I remember all that? Matter of over-secretion of hormones in cells next door to some kind of follicles."

Eustace burst into a roar of laughter. "Sounds like old Geoff. Is that the sort of diet he feeds Polly on? She must be in love with him if she can stand it!"

"Polly's up on endocrines. Every once in a while she and Elsie get going on the subject, but I always shut them up. Never did like the idea of knowing too much about my inwards. Don't know which side my liver is on and always dodged physiology at school. Suppose it's because I never was ill in my life. Besides, as far as I can make out, they wouldn't take much interest in endocrines if one set didn't happen to be stocked up with sex and made the others dance to its tune more or less. That's enough for me. By the way, what do you think Elsie told me the other day—said she thought the time had come when I could stand it——" She paused abruptly and jerked her shoulders, her brows an unbroken and twisted line.

"I'd be interested to know." His eyes narrowed to conceal a smile.

"I hate to repeat it and she made me so furious I could have thrown something at her. Said the reason I never could look like a boy was because I had no male cells in some place or other—that if I had, with the morbid psychology induced by my early experience and hatred of your sex, nothing could have 'saved' me. I wonder if people were always sex-mad!"

"Probably. Today they are more verbally interested because for the first time they know something of cause instead of merely taking effect for granted, and romanticizing it. But Elsie was quite right. You have an un-

commonly balanced endocrine constitution and you may be thankful——"

"I prefer not to think about it."

"Don't. Forget it by all means."

"I shall, now that I've unloaded it on you. . . . I should think that knowing too much would be the death of romance."

"Quite. And far better for the race. But you're the last person I should expect to set up a wail over the death of romance."

"Not I. Jolly good thing it's out of date. Merely made an observation. You've taught me to look all round a subject."

"And you're the aptest of pupils. But I'm tired of playing schoolmaster—for the present—and I should think that in time it would corrode the vanity of a beautiful and highly intelligent woman to sit constantly at the feet of a man. Do let us play for a while."

Gita looked hard at him, but he returned her stare unflinchingly.

"You said yourself that love was a matter of suggestion, and you might come to fancy you were really in love with me," she remarked. "That would be simply horrid and spoil everything."

"My imagination never runs away with me even when I am writing fiction. And I assure you I shall never be in doubt of my true sentiments for a moment."

Gita smiled. "You do play rather well. I've often watched you at parties."

"Whole-heartedly."

He looked prosaic enough with that beard and those rather plump cheeks. And if she could simulate interest in him it would help her to be noble with Polly. If

Geoffrey Pelham looked on, so much the better. Another act in her play—more unreal than the stage itself!

"All right." She caught her hat by the crown and stood up. "What's the first move? How do I do it?"

"Leave it to me. Just be the flying princess for a time."

She grinned widely. "Good title for a musical comedy. And I'll like that rôle well enough."

CHAPTER X

Eight or ten of the guests were up in Bylant's rooms playing poker and refreshing themselves at will. Extravagantly as they admired Gita they were a little in awe of her in her own house, and when under her eye assuaged their thirst discreetly. Bylant had a wide bed and a divan, if they were forced to remain for the night, and he could sneak them downstairs in the morning before his wife was awake.

Gita had given several parties during the winter but refused to ask more than forty at a time. She disliked crowded rooms, where the selfish appropriated the chairs and sofas permanently, while the others were forced to stand about or wander. A few always retired to her ark, those who liked to hear themselves talk and two or three who had formed the habit of listening. A mutually interested couple generally migrated to the ecclesiastical chest in the hall. In the large drawing-room and connecting dining-room the rest of the guests sat comfortably, drank the cocktails and whisky and soda passed by the host and gave a divided attention to the spontaneous performances of the livelier members of the company. There was a good deal of music tonight, a diseuse was convulsing and brief, there were impromptu little plays and much staccato talk. One distinguished exponent of bald realism untempered by art, too swiftly susceptible to synthetic gin, stole upstairs early in the evening and appropriated the divan for the night. A dark young actress, famous as a stage adventuress, who barely tolerated any man but

her husband and drank nothing stronger than root-beer, curled up in an easy chair and went to sleep; her invariable habit. Polly had steered Dr. Pelham into a corner behind the piano and kept him there, and Elsie, who was helping Gita play hostess, watched her brother out of a corner of her eye. Many celebrities were present: Gora Dwight, a novelist both popular and important; Lee Clavering, whose play had been a Broadway sensation since September; Marian Starr Darsett; De Witt Turner and his wife, Suzan Forbes; Potts Dawes; Max Durand; Fellowes Merton; Helen Vane Baker, of two worlds, and Peter Whiffle.

While a young musical-comedy actress was giving the convolutions of a skirt-dance, spontaneously invented, Gita found an empty chair behind a door and indulged in a yawn. She suddenly felt bored with New York and parties. And clever people could be as monotonous in time as the more stereotyped society to which Mrs. Pleyden had introduced her. What did it all amount to? They went on like this winter after winter and not one of them looked blasé, not even Marian Starr Darsett, who was reputed to be entering upon her hundred-and-ninth love-affair. But they all had some gift, or used their brains otherwise to a definite purpose. Hers was like a whirlpool, careering round and round in circles and to no purpose whatever. The simile stopped at the vortex; she never got as far as that!

Next winter? And next? And next? The prospect was appalling. . . . However, after six months in the country—reactions were automatic. . . . She had arranged for several house-parties—and felt disposed to withdraw the invitations. But that would leave her alone with Eustace. He bored her less than anyone, but if he kept up that ridiculous game she'd explode before they'd

been isolated in the manor a week. His "wooing," tentative so far as became the first stage, had shown him to be possessed of more charm than she had suspected, but she preferred him without it. How could they ever get back to their old relationship when the game was given up as a bad job? She hated make-believe anyway. She was made for realities. . . . Realities? What were they? In this sort of life, anyhow? Perhaps, after all, she'd have been better satisfied with life if she had been forced to take a job in San Francisco.

Although she had had spasms of restlessness and dissatisfaction of late, not to mention certain abrupt flights of imagination, she had felt nothing of the sort when she had stood before her mirror a few hours earlier and put the finishing touches to her toilette. Her gown was white and silver and vastly becoming. She wore all her pearls, and had applied a light touch of powder. But as she sat there behind the door, almost concealed from her guests, she lost all interest in her beauty. Polly was far prettier than she and always looked her most dazzling in red. Tonight she wore a quaint flaming head-dress and little gold curls escaped everywhere. She hadn't left Pelham's side for a moment since they entered at nine o'clock, and it was now a quarter to twelve. And he looked anything but bored.

"Why are you hiding, Miss Carteret?" De Witt Turner was looming over her, his great bulk encased in loose tweed. If he possessed evening clothes he never wore them. "Your party is a stunning success as usual. I hope we haven't tired you out."

"Not a bit of it. Do sit down."

The only unoccupied chair was one of the small upright contributions from Brittany, and Turner disposed himself carefully; then finding it more secure than most

ancient furniture, hunched down and lit a cigarette. "Do you know what I've been wondering?" he continued. "If by any chance you brought over those ancestral costumes of yours? We might all dress up again and improvise a sort of Colonial farce. I rather yearn for my flounces."

Gita smiled up at him without effort; he was one of her favorites. "Too bad. They're down at the manor." And then she surprised herself by announcing: "I've locked them in their chests for good and all. They'll never be worn again in my time. You see . . . it would be a pity to cheapen the first impression. Don't you think so?"

"Artistically you're right, no doubt. But it seems rather a pity—sort of waste. Perhaps that's rather hypocritical of me. We all enjoyed looking like bloods for once, to say nothing of imagining ourselves handsome. The men, I mean. I think I prefer women in their modern frocks and short hair. But Dr. Pelham, for instance, will never look like that again unless you relent."

To Gita's annoyance she felt herself blushing, a new and ridiculous habit of hers. There had been a time when she prided herself upon a fine static red and laughed at girls whose color changed with every passing emotion. "I'm sure he doesn't want to," she replied tartly. "Surgeons are scientists, you know, and scientists have no use for anything so frivolous as fancy dress. About the most matter-of-fact men in the world, I should think."

"Um. Science requires imagination of a certain sort and surgery is nervous work. The most temperamental man I know is a surgeon." His glance traveled to the corner behind the piano. "Scientists have even been known to fall in love. I should say Pelham had some use for Miss Pleyden. What do you think?"

"Isn't Polly lovely!"

"She is, indeed. No wonder he's bowled over." But like Mrs. Pleyden, he had seen certain straying glances from Pelham's unambiguous eyes. He had also noted the blush. Gita was a puzzle to him and he sometimes suspected she was still a puzzle to his friend, known as her husband. As a novelist he would have liked to solve it. His fiction, although it dealt with the prosaic realities of life, and he handled sex without tongs, was pervaded by a haunting almost poignant beauty, which drove from his inner being not from his theme. He was in no danger of falling in love with Gita, being quite satisfied with "Miss Forbes," and, like musicians, preferring to find beauty on the abstract plane; but he never saw this particular beauty with her lofty "springing" little head, her black flashing eyes that seemed to carry back no farther than her mind, her curious aura of virginity, her contradictory magnetic personality and undeviating aloofness, and a certain checked sweetness with it all, without the sensation that some musical instrument within him was vibrating to new harmonies, and he longed to grasp and immortalize them. In other words he would have liked to make her the heroine of a novel.

But the music was too elusive. He only faintly guessed what she suggested. She looked one thing and was so indisputably something else. Once he had tried to pump Elizabeth Pelham, but that loyal friend had laughed at his assumption of mystery. Gita was just Gita. One answer to the riddle, no doubt, was that the girl didn't know herself. Something had arrested her development, and the man she had married that night when she came down the stairs and made himself nearly bawl outright with her astounding beauty, had as yet taught her nothing. He had met her several times before the wedding and many times since, and although she no longer treated every man

as a possible enemy, she had changed not at all in essentials.

But was she on the verge of a change of some sort? He noted that she looked tired and rather melancholy for the first time since he had known her . . . less assured. An ardent feminist, he believed in women taking precisely the same liberties with orthodoxies as men had done since the beginning of time; and if this entrancing creature had found she was mistaken and contemplated throwing over poor old Eustace, why not? Men were pretty philosophical these days—taking a leaf out of the age-old Book of Woman—and although it would come hard on Bylant, no doubt, if he found she preferred another man, he'd renounce her without whimpering. . . . But . . . would she? . . . did she? . . . or, why not? He felt there was a key to the riddle somewhere and wished he knew her history. But he knew nothing beyond the bare facts that she had been born and brought up in Europe, had lived for a time in California, and arrived in New Jersey shortly before her grandmother's death.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Gita, smiling. "You haven't said a word for five minutes."

"You. I was wondering how long we'd have you with us."

"What an idea. You'll probably sit with me in this room at precisely the same hour next year."

"The slight bitterness of your accent confirms my misgivings. I doubt if you'll be in this house."

"What do you mean?" she asked, frowning.

"Well, that you've been fumbling, so far—not even experimenting, like most women."

"I don't like either word."

"Neither really should apply to you. You're extremely clear-sighted about most things, but there's a catch some-

where. I can't get it. I'd like to, and I too am fumbling, just now. At all events that is the way you impress me, and I've a hazy idea that you'll come out of the fog before long."

"Come out of the fog?" Gita stared at him under lowered brows and then jerked her head. "I forgot you were a maker of phrases."

"Only when I'm sweating at the typewriter. I assure you that was spontaneous—and seems to fit you."

"'Out of the fog.'" Her voice sounded dazed. "Do you mean I don't know where I am?"

"Something like that. You're a riddle to yourself, as you are to other people."

"That is not true! I know myself perfectly."

"Then you dwell in another dimension from the rest of us."

Gita colored angrily. "By that, I suppose, you mean I am even more conceited than the rest of you. Quite a feat!"

He laughed good-naturedly. "Quite, indeed. And you're not. But you're very honest. Do you really believe you've explored yourself thoroughly—made a complete chart of all the subterranean streams, and peaks—sort of magnet for fogs? Now, do you?"

Gita moved uneasily. "Yes, I do. I've had a very wide and varied experience of life that you know nothing about. No one has ever had an opportunity to gauge herself more exhaustively than I."

"Ah! I'm not surprised to hear you say that. . . . You suggest a play in four acts with a prologue and epilogue. . . . But I can't make even a guess. Have you ever been in love?" he asked bluntly.

Gita drew herself up haughtily. "That question was in excessively bad taste."

"We've abandoned taste with other old clichés." But he took the edge from this announcement of an unassailable fact with a disarming smile. "And if you haven't, you will, you know. You're not in the least in love with Eustace, and you've got it coming—when the fog lifts."

He was angling, and had hoped for a minnow, but was by no means prepared for a whale. Gita turned white, then almost purple; her eyes shot red sparks and her mouth drew back until it made an ugly grimace. For a moment he thought she was going to strike him. A curious devastating force seemed to emanate from her and he turned hot all over, as if his skin had been seared. He was almost terrified but had the presence of mind to move forward; if his face were slapped his ignominy would not be too public at least.

The expression lasted but an instant and her face settled into a mask of fear; he had the impression that she was no longer aware of his presence. "If I thought that," she articulated, "I'd go out and kill myself. It is the most hideous fate that can befall a woman, the most loathsome and degrading. But—thank God!—I'm not capable of it."

There was another lightning change and he was staring, almost open-mouthed, at the Miss Carteret to whom he was so agreeably accustomed. "You psychological novelists," she said complainingly, "with your everlasting probing, get on my nerves. And your assumption that you can make a fashion of bad taste even more. The radical is not in the saddle yet, and even when he is, there will be groups in which manners and codes will survive and become the standard once more when the same old wheel has finished the same old revolution. Look at France."

He smiled amusedly. "Perhaps. But freedom of speech and of thought seems to me of more consequence

than taste. . . . But I wouldn't offend you for the world," he added hastily. "Nor, for a jugful, have you other than you are."

"Thanks." She rose, and smiled as he rose also. "Odd, you never forget your own manners. What a lot of self-posers we are! I see that supper is being brought in and I'm sure you want yours."

"Whew!" Turner almost whistled as he stood where she had left him. "Whew!" And he wondered if he had had a glimmer. . . .

CHAPTER XI

"I'm going down to the manor tomorrow," announced Gita as she and Eustace lingered for a moment in the drawing-room after the last guest had departed.

"Tomorrow? But we were not to go until Tuesday."

"You needn't go. In fact I'd like to be alone for a while. Tired out. Don't want to open my mouth for a week."

"Oh! As you please, of course. I'll be detained until Tuesday. You do look tired," he added solicitously. "But I shall miss you abominably. Couldn't you shut yourself up here and rest?"

"I want my old manor more than anything in the world!" she said passionately. "And I must be alone."

He stifled both astonishment and curiosity. "Then you shall have it, or anything else you want. Sit down for a moment and have a cigarette." And Gita, who had no desire for the solitude of her bed, obeyed him.

"I shall have to sleep on that davenport," he said humorously. "Three of my friends are dead to the world upstairs."

"Beasts."

"'Fraid it's bootlegger gin." And then he slipped on the harness of his new rôle. "I saw you hidden in a corner with De Witt Turner for at least a quarter of an hour," he said with a nice assumption of jealousy. "Women fall for him very hard, you know."

"Do they? They must be fools. I hate him."

Bylant raised his brows in genuine surprise. "Hate

old Witt? He's about the least hatable man in New York, I should think."

"Well, I can't endure him and I'm not going to ask him to one of the house-parties."

"Did he make love to you?"

"I should think not. He wouldn't dare. He merely says anything that comes into his head, and he's a boor."

"Oh, no, not that. He's a gentleman, with deliberately applied excrescences. He dresses like a farmer to reconcile his income with his moral approval of socialism, and if he berates old codes and standards to which he was born, that is but one phase of this attempt to coördinate a new and militant fact with the ancient instinct of self-preservation. The new man is having as hard a time of it as the new woman had a quarter of a century ago—trying to be something he isn't. At least men of Witt's breeding. They've got to shake down, that's all. You're too clear-visioned to take this particular phase of social evolution for anything but what it's worth. . . . Perhaps," hopefully, "he merely bored you."

"That's it, probably." But she knew it was not. She hated Turner because he had for some inexplicable reason infuriated her with the mere use of a word of four letters which for months she had bandied about with the rest. She had behaved exactly as she would have done a year ago, while she was still inside her "fort," as Elsie had so aptly expressed it. No doubt that ridiculous suggestion of drifting in a fog had a good deal to do with it. But she knew she had betrayed something, she hardly knew what, to the enterprising eye of that novelist, and she wished never to see him again.

"Let us forget him," said Eustace softly. "May I tell you that I never saw you look as lovely as you do tonight?"

"Your compliments sound exactly the same as they did

before you set about trying to be something *you're* not!" Gita, glad of the diversion, laughed merrily.

"And you promised to play up! Let us imagine we are guests who have lingered down here for a few last words while our hosts have gone decorously to bed——"

"Instead of three drunks."

"They are not worth remembering. I have persuaded you to linger on for a little talk."

"Well, here I am." Gita stifled a yawn. "Rather sleepy, but I'll do my best. Anyhow, I never like you so much as when I've been with a lot of tiresome people." And she hoped her smile was bewitching.

His own was spontaneous. "Don't you think you could like me a little?" he murmured.

"Like you a lot—— Oh, no, I mean—what the devil do girls say? I suppose I ought to know as I've read that question five hundred times in novels. Wish I could remember the answers."

"Say what you think you would say if you really were a girl rather interested and I were trying to make you more so."

Gita raked her mind. This little comedy with Eustace often amused her. "I—think—I'm rather beginning to," she faltered, and batted her eyelashes as she had seen Eva Le Gallienne do on the stage a few nights since.

Eustace drew up his chair and bent over her. He had begun to turn off the lights before they fell into conversatian and in the soft dimness he looked rather handsome to Gita's critical eye. Distinguished he always looked. Perhaps she had been wrong—hadn't known her personal predilections so well, after all . . . if it were in her to "love" any man it should be this one, who combined so much, and whom, her sharp eyes had long since informed her, other women found so attractive. She smiled in-

dulgently and repressed a desire to say: "Go ahead." She would play up.

Bylant himself was a little at a loss. He had never set out deliberately to "woo" a woman, and although he had more than once fallen into step without visible effort, he had, on the whole, accepted casually and briefly what was offered him. He felt resentfully that he would know how to handle the situation in a novel, and wondered why pen-experience should avail him so little when it came to his own vital concerns. Possibly because he was so confoundedly in earnest, and detachment annihilated.

"Beginning?" He laid his hand on hers.

Gita patted it amiably. "Nice hands. Strong, but well-shaped. Not too artistic to be manly. And always warm, and not too soft—or white. That's your golf and tennis——"

"Oh, Gita!" he said despairingly. "Lovers—would-be lovers—don't. . . . You should either draw your hand away shyly or turn it over and give mine a slight pressure."

"All right. Let's begin over. I think I'll do the last. You often make me feel you're here to hang on to——"

"You're not worried about anything?" In the dim light he had caught a fleeting expression of fear in her eyes—or fancied it?

"What have I to worry me? But that's the kind of question a husband or accepted lover would ask. You've whirled too far ahead on your merry-go-round. Get back to the starting-point."

"I never seem to get beyond it. Will you give me a kiss?"

"I've often kissed you."

"I don't mean a peck. And you're out of your rôle. It's what any man would ask a girl, you know, who had let herself be persuaded to stay on with him downstairs

at two in the morning. She'd think him a chump if he didn't."

"But that's going rather fast—for some girls. Others kiss any man any old time. I'm the great exception or you wouldn't think I'm the one and only. And I don't think I care for that part of the program."

"It's bound to come sooner or later."

"Not at all. You talked a lot about wooing but there was no understanding you were to win—not by a long sight——"

"Please stay in your rôle. I am begging for a kiss."

Gita looked at him reflectively. There wasn't so much to kiss between that mustache and beard. She didn't altogether like his mouth but she was used to it. And if it was the thing to do—she moved her head forward; and then she encountered a disturbing gleam in his half-closed eyes, and drew back; restraining an impulse to hiss and flee. She had seen that gleam in men's eyes before. Carnalites. Eustace!

At the same moment she became conscious of a resource that was offering its timely aid. "Not yet," she murmured with soft coquetry. "It's too soon. Talk to me for a little while first. Talk to me about yourself," she added with inspiration. "Tell me when you first began to find me attractive. After—later——"

She leaned her elbow on the arm of the chair and covered her eyes with her hand. Eustace, drawing a long breath, but admiring this astonishing adaptability to a rôle so foreign to her, leaned back in his chair and began to talk on a low and vibrating note; expressing his hopes and fears, his longings and doubts, with considerable art; for, he told himself, he said not a word too much nor too little. At the end of ten minutes he

asked her a question. There was no answer. He bent over her. She was fast asleep.

He refrained from shaking her roughly, but shake her he did.

She sprang to her feet and yawned in his face. "Oh, Eustace, how rude of me! But your voice was so soothing and I was nearly dead with sleep. Hated to be so impolite as to tell you—we'll have to continue on page 181 from page 2. Good night, dear Eustace, and forgive me."

And she slipped by him like a trout under water and up the stair.

CHAPTER XII

Gita arrived at the manor in time for dinner and spent the greater part of the night wandering about the house, which she had ordered to be lit from drawing-room to attic. She was so glad to be there—and alone—that she felt no inclination to sleep, and even the haunting terrors of the past week were banished for the moment.

She had a quite personal species of humor that she could invoke at will, and a large surface-tract in her mind upon which she had lived abundantly during the past year. But, always ruthlessly honest with herself, she had begun to suspect, even before that remarkably odd outbreak under the goading of De Witt Turner, that something had been going on underneath that broad and fertile surface which it was time for her to tweak to the light and examine. She had turned from it in terror, almost in horror, and had permitted herself a respite until she was alone at her manor.

But on this night of her return she felt only happiness and content. This was hers, her own domain, memoried, beautiful, and intensely personal; so personal that she had at times the impression she had lived in this house consecutively for two hundred and sixty-three years. It seemed to return her passionate devotion, to enfold her, to promise her peace, possibly happiness. She exulted in every stone of it, and drew her hand lovingly across the old pieces of furniture, less sensible of their value than of their intimate association with the past.

She could remain here for the rest of her life if she chose, denying even Eustace hospitality, and she had a sense of freedom, of buoyancy, vastly different from the superficial enjoyments of the past winter in New York. They had been novel and entrancing, but both novelty and charm had worn thin; and they had served their purpose. No woman is complete until she has had her experience of the lighter pleasures of life; barely conscious of the depths underneath until frivolities turn into débris and balance is established.

She had long suspected that she knew a good deal more than she admitted to herself, both apart from her personal ego and inextricably entangled with it, and it was time to find out what it was. She was uneasy, frightened, but determined.

Well, in a day or two she would take the lid off, but tonight she would play with the idea that she had lived her life at the manor and that no serious problems had ever knocked at her consciousness for solution.

A storm raged during the night and showed no sign of abatement next morning. She put on a raincoat and stout boots and went over to the deserted Boardwalk. The chain of shops looked like an abandoned village. But the waves thundered in almost to the high promenade, and she took a fierce pleasure in battling with the wind, clinging only occasionally to the rail. She felt as if she were charging an elemental enemy and chose to take it as a portent, that although she might for a moment be forced to clutch at something stronger than herself, she could neither be blown over nor forced to retreat.

That night she slept twelve hours, and when the broad sunlight awakened her, her brain was as clear as the sky and she knew that her respite was over; or would be when the day itself was over. She had decided that the

night, when she would be free of interruption from even her docile servants, was the time to "have it out."

Topper had received instructions to admit no one and to bring her no telephone messages. Eustace had promised not to return to the manor before Friday, nor attempt to communicate with her. Her isolation was complete.

After breakfast she took a long walk on the hard roads, and spent the afternoon answering an accumulation of letters from her California friends. Ann Melrose had spent the winter in New York and written home reports both astonishing and amusing; the result had been a revival of correspondence with the girl they had "given up as a bad job."

But the hands of the clock, made for the first American Carteret, in Connecticut—a province that would seem to have been so completely occupied during the seventeenth century building historic furniture for twentieth-century collectors the wonder is it found time for the making of Puritanical history—moved relentlessly on, and at nine o'clock the house was as silent as the vault in the churchyard.

Early in the day she had brought down from the attic the gown of gold tissue she had worn the night of the party, and she went up to her bedroom and put it on. The wigs had been returned, but she powdered her hair and even put a patch on her cheek. She had a whimsical idea that in capturing the outward semblance of the old Gita Carterets she would banish the last of those inhibitions which had made her so different not only from them but from all other girls, and, with her saner knowledge of life, help her to that exact understanding of herself she had fancied she possessed in the past.

She locked the doors of the drawing-room, lit several

candles, and established herself in one of the few comfortable chairs a century, singularly indifferent to comfort, had produced.

"Now!" she said aloud, "off with the lid." And she routed a last moment of shrinking.

Nature had endowed her superlatively, and a neurosis, inevitable in a sensitive aspiring fastidious girl, had given her a rabid hatred of a sex designed, among other purposes, to complete her own. Her abhorrence of sex in all its manifestations had been, in a measure, a subtle protest against thwarted romance: an invention of the Teutonic-Nordics, to be sure, but none the less potent when rubbed in by the centuries. Nor had modernism killed it. Realists were not so much realists from reaction or conviction as from resentment at their own inability to realize it. They were in the same class with radicals who hated a society in which they were incapacitated by natural equipment to achieve success.

Life, literature, nor history would be sufferable without the glamour of romance, however personally immiscible. The invention and constant use of the word "love" was proof of that. Mere decency ordained that a certain enchantment be shed over a function as native as hunger, where personal selection, imposed by civilization, was concerned.

Well, she accepted the fact. Also the fact that what her three friends called a sound endocrine constitution had saved her from becoming one of those semi-outlaws so freely discussed in her new circle. That was a phase she had no desire to dwell on, but she faced it squarely. Such women, she had been told, had sometimes the most idealized relationships, a mental and spiritual harmony seldom found with men; being rarely fools. Through this ominous lack of balance in the ductless glands and

an arbitrary gift from Nature of cells which had no legitimate place in their anatomy, they were not only enabled but compelled to love their own sex; and as faithfully, protectively, and self-sacrificingly, as those that were fitted with normal response to man. Often more so. They were by no means mere sensualists. Nature here was as inexorable as elsewhere and she had not waited upon the decadence of civilizations to develop the type. It had existed since the dawn of history. No doubt since the dawn of time.

What Nature's purpose was no man could guess. But that she had a purpose, methodical creature that she was, no intelligent man could doubt.

But she had passed over one Gita Carteret, even refusing to unbalance those cells, with everything working in her favor. The result was that Gita Carteret had been isolated high and dry. A rock in mid-ocean. A capacity for agreeable friendships, but about as emotional as an unhatched egg.

Well, that was that. She'd never think of it again if she could avoid it. But insularity had its compensations!

She felt as if something resistant in her brain were straining and creaking as she swung it ruthlessly to that strange moment when De Witt Turner's words—uttered more or less at random—had turned her mind into a cauldron. But that frenzied moment had not only been a revelation but a deliverance. She had experienced a sensation of exhaustion when it was over, during which she felt that something had exploded, then taken wing. That such an access of hatred for a side of life still unexplored would never come again. She had been delivered—and for what?

Not for Eustace Bylant. Her recoil from that gleam in his eyes when he bent forward to kiss her was con-

clusive. No need to be asexual to be revolted at the thought of kissing a man she did not love and never could love. Even his light and frequent touch, of which she had barely been conscious as long as the lid was down, would be unendurable hereafter.

He "loved" her, of course. Always had. She had kept the lid down with a vengeance! She must have known from the first that he was in love with her in the orthodox male fashion—known it down in that automatically recording invisible register; but that censored mind of hers had turned its back blithely; kept its conscious part suspended in that rarefied ether she had chosen as her habitat, peopled with queer eidola of her human acquaintance.

Too bad! It would have been the ideal solution to love Eustace, who had so much to offer, with whom she could live her life in a companionship found by few women with the men of their choice. But she did not. She almost hated him. He must never return here. She'd write and tell him so at once. If he hadn't loved her she'd be willing to go on. But she had had one of her illuminating flashes. She knew he had reached the limit of his endurance.

But she had no intention of making him ridiculous. She had liked him too well for that, owed him too much. They could give out they were starting for Europe or South America—which he often talked of visiting—and he could travel while she lived in secrecy at the manor. The manor was her best friend. A friend, it seemed to her, and not only last night, that had schooled and soothed and strengthened her for centuries. A part of her. Even the blood that had come down to her had stained its boards. There had been a duel out there in the hall. And, in another century, an unbridled Carteret,

who loved the wife of his guest, had been stabbed in his bedroom—the one her imperturbable grandmother had chosen for her own. . . .

Poor Eustace! What irony! Years of seeking for the one woman who exteriorized his secret fixation, to find her only to learn that the shell had deluded him, that there was nothing within it for him. Worse. To train her, to wear down her defenses, to deliver her from her accumulated obliquities, for another man. What was the matter with life? Controlled it would seem, not by a Beneficent Power, but by what Poe had called the Imp of the Perverse. . . .

The only thing she hated to give up was Bladina's pearls!

And the Brittany set. But no doubt she could buy that from Eustace. . . .

She told herself harshly that she was twisting and turning from that final probing, and after a moment of real terror, in which she felt an impulse to flee from the room, tearing off that whispering old gown as she ran, she set her teeth and went to the brink and peered down once more.

She was in love with Geoffrey Pelham. She said the words aloud to steady her nerves with their finality. Then shrugged her shoulders and settled back in her chair, although she kicked a stool across the room.

Well, what did it mean? What was she to do about it? He had been obsessing her conscious mind since the night at the Pleydens', possibly her unconscious since they had sat together in this room. Now that she had hauled him out into the light he would probably obsess every waking moment and haunt her dreams.

She felt that no caged eagle could be more resentful than she at this moment. Her pride had been as ab-

normal as her existence. Her ego could hardly have been more extended if she had been a heroin addict. That old dream of herself, solitary on a solitary peak had been more than an escape-fulfillment; it had been a reveling of the ego in its complete independence. And there was no independence in the surrender of one's ego to another, even in this latter-day pretense of fifty-fifty. Women were exactly the same fundamentally as they had always been. Their instinct was surrender—blind instinct of the race to survive.

But she hadn't got as far as that yet! If loathing had been exorcised in that final explosion under that detestable novelist's goading, and she had been ejected out of the fog into a dazzle of light—mercifully blinded for the moment to the fact of Geoffrey Pelham—she was conscious of no sexual discomfort. She had never discussed that subject with anyone, but modernists in fiction were remarkably frank, and while they deadened the imagination of the reader, they left little to be learned by mere experience. She knew all about it!

But although her blood traveled its accustomed gait, she knew that Geoffrey Pelham's image was sunken deep in that unpicturesque pump of hers called heart, and probably forever. She was not the woman to be able to love twice. She recalled the definition of love he had given to Polly, and concluded it was more likely to be correct than anything heretofore advanced. Science was explaining one mystery after another, psychical as well as physical, and she for one liked to know what was the matter with her.

She analyzed her sensations toward this man who had torn her old theories about herself up by the roots. Eustace had once told her that analysis was fatal to love, but that was an old delusion that surprised her in a man

uncommonly clear and precise of vision. She felt exactly the same whether she analyzed or not.

Polly had said she felt thrills, turned hot and cold, lost her breath. Well, so far, she had felt none of that. But there was a piercing sweetness, moments of intolerable aspiration, of a desire to wing upward with him to unimaginable heights, dwelling in spiritual contact with him forever. Another trick of elemental sex, no doubt, preliminary to the desire for surrender. . . .

Hacking her way through what was left of the fog she arrived at the conclusion that if she were still insensible to passion it was because, after her long lethargy, mortared with violent repulsion, she was dependent for that upon his physical contact.

But here she would have kicked another stool across the room had there been one within reach.

This piercing sweetness was all right, this divine consciousness that uplifted and exalted her—but did she want anything more? She doubted it. One indelible lesson life had taught her: that realities were disillusionizing and commonplace. Often hard and ugly. Moreover—— Yes, moreover! One inhibition appeared to be still firmly planted.

She knew she could marry Geoffrey if she chose. Eustace would never stand in her way. He would be bitterly disappointed, wretched, mortified, angry, but he was not the man to hold a woman to a hollow alliance. When he realized that she was inexorable he would wrap himself up in a mantle of philosophy and retire from the field.

And if she did not marry Geoffrey Pelham, Polly would. She'd make herself as intimate and necessary as his coat and button herself round him in some moment of hopeless depression. After that, of course, he would love her. No man could help it.

She emitted a low growl. Then beat her hands on the arms of her chair. What did it matter? Why deprive the poor man of what consolation he could get? He had given her something Polly could never take from her (what Polly would be forced to content herself with was what she herself rejected) and she could continue to love him and fulfill her soul more completely than if she entered into prosaic—and hateful—matrimony with him. No pleasures, when all was said and done, could equal those of the imagination. She had always despised stories with happy endings. And shrunk from ultimates. After flowers weeds. No soil left for imagination or the psyche. Happy marriages? Oh, yes, plenty of them. She had even seen several in advanced sophisticate circles, although they were always informing you they gave each other complete liberty, and would not shed a tear over a passing infatuation. Or else worrying if it could last, and exactly how they would act if it didn't. Commit suicide or look round for someone else? But with all their febrile self-consciousness they were happy enough. And outside of that limited circle, where people did not bother about being modern and took life as it came, no doubt there were thousands of happy marriages.

But life had not educated her for happiness of that sort, however she may have scrambled to the top of her old pit. She could love, but not in duality. She had found something very wonderful and precious and inspiring, but there was only one way to keep it.

To be jealous of Polly was monstrous, unworthy of her. She was, of course, but she'd dig it out by the roots.

And what was she to do with her life? She must make something of it. She wanted no more of society of any sort. She took no interest—beyond that of any intelligent person—in politics, and she certainly would associate

herself with nothing that led to being constantly surrounded by masses of women. She had no artistic gift; active work in the cause of charity would merely bore her. . . . It might be amusing to adopt a dozen children. . . . Well, that decision could wait. She had enough on her hands for the present——

CHAPTER XIII

Her excogitations came to a sudden end. The bright color left her cheeks, and she stood up, rigid, her head bent forward. The heavy doors were closed but her ears were very keen. She had heard a light footfall on the stair. Stealthy?

She had a high courage and had seldom felt fear; physical fear, at least. But the servants never returned to this part of the house at night and were in bed and asleep shortly after nine o'clock. And the house was set far back from the road. And it must be nearly midnight. For a moment she lost her breath and shivered. Then she jerked her head angrily and shook her nerves into order. Her jewels had been sent to the bank and the pearls were in the safe. That hiding-place behind the panel in her grandmother's room was known only to herself, Topper, Elsie, Polly, and Eustace.

She blew out the candles, removed her slippers, and stole to the door leading into the hall. It opened without a sound and she hid behind it and peered out through the crack. The hall was dimly lighted. She saw no one, but again she heard that light footfall. It stopped as if in doubt, and she held her breath. Then it moved toward the library. She heard a door open, close.

She tiptoed across the hall and up the stairs. Her bedroom door was open. She had closed it to shut in the warmth of the fire. She lit the gas and glanced about swiftly. Nothing, apparently, had been disturbed.

Elsie, who was timid, had made her buy a pistol and

keep it in the drawer of the table by her bed. She took it out, examined it to make sure it was still loaded, then crept down the stairs and listened at the door of the library. Soft light steps were pacing up and down. What on earth could the man want? There was no safe in the library. . . . The silver? She stole over to the dining-room. The silver was locked every night in safes concealed behind false doors in the lower part of two immense sideboards. She closed the door and lit the gas. There was no evidence that the room had been visited since Topper had put it in order for the night.

She returned to the library door. The man was still pacing. He must be after the furniture and was awaiting the signal of a confederate. She had found little time for detective stories but she had read a few. And the furniture in the manor house was worth a small fortune.

She flung open the door and raised the pistol. "Stick up your hands!" she commanded, recalling the formula.

The room was in complete darkness but she saw a detached shadow move suddenly forward.

"Don't advance another step," she cried, and hoped he would be too startled to perceive that her arm wabbled; she must be outlined against the faint light of the hall. "One step more and I'll fire."

The man made a sudden bolt to the right and then a rush at her. She fired, and thought the house was crashing about her ears. But the man came on, and she darted to the other side of the room, realizing her mistake at once; she should have retreated to the hall.

The man's ears were as keen as hers and it was evident he had been neither hit nor deafened. He came straight for her, and she could only hope he would trip over some piece of furniture. She was safe from that danger for she had arranged the furniture herself.

She dodged behind the center table and fired again, hoping that if she could not hit that agile shadow the servants would be roused by the noise. But they slept in a wing and were cut off from the main house by massive doors. This time she hardly noticed the sound, she heard nothing but the man's heavy breathing.

The shadow was on the opposite side of the table. She was about to fire, confident that this time he could not escape her, when he disappeared. A second later a hand caught her ankle and she was tripped and thrown flat. She had the presence of mind to give a violent lurch and roll behind a chair. But she had no time to rise, for the man had emerged from under the table and was feeling about the floor. She still clutched her pistol.

She heard him rise to his feet and move about uncertainly. She held her breath, no longer terrified. She was too angry. The back of the chair was very high. She dared not raise her head. If he would only come round the corner. She felt a cold desire to kill, and would not fire again until he was so close it would be impossible to miss him. But he was standing still, his breath coming in short gasps. Then his breathing stopped altogether, while her own released breath sounded like a wind in her ears. An instant later he had flung the chair aside and was upon her.

She managed to struggle to her feet but he had his arm about her and was groping for the pistol. His hot breath was on her face and she exerted herself frantically. She kicked him, and regretted her slippers. She tried to bite him and was tempted to drop the pistol and use her free hand to scratch his eyes out. But the pistol was her only hope, and even in that iron embrace she managed to duck and writhe and fling herself back. She was

as strong as he was! Not for nothing was she an out-of-doors' girl.

She held her right hand rigidly behind her, twisting him about as well as herself as he tried to reach her hand. They revolved in absurd gyrations, breathless, speechless. Suddenly his hand grasped her right shoulder and tried to wrench it. She bent down her head and bit him. He gave a hard gasp, then jerked her still more firmly to him, put his hand over her face, forcing back her head, and rained kisses on her neck and throat.

For a moment she had an illusion of paralysis. Not for an instant had she imagined the man was after anything but loot. He had come for her! Or was this revenge? Or a desperate attempt to shock her into submission? What difference? She knew that her skin was soft and sweet and the man virile. And she was almost at his mercy.

She was possessed by such a fury of rage as she had never believed even she could experience. Her exhibition to De Witt Turner had been but a pale umbra of what she felt at this moment when her sacred virginity was threatened.

The man was panting. He took his hand from her face and she felt his lips approaching her own. She butted him in the chest with her head, gave a violent wrench that half freed her, swung round her pistol and fired. The man dropped without a groan.

For a moment she could not stir, her legs were sinking under her. Then she staggered to the table, felt for matches, and lit the lamp. She stood gasping and panting, not daring to turn her head.

Courage ebbed back. Something must be done. Police. Ambulance. Topper. She started to leave the room. The man groaned, very faintly.

Perhaps she'd better put a pillow under his head. She tiptoed back to her fallen assailant, intending to approach him from behind. The word "malingering" occurred to her. And no doubt he had a pistol of his own.

And then she stopped and screamed twice. The man lying in his blood was Eustace Bylant.

Some time later she was wondering if she had fainted. She was sitting on a chair, shaking from head to foot, her teeth chattering. Hours seemed to pass.

Slowly her blood resumed its even flow, her limbs obeyed her will, and suddenly she laughed.

"So! Caveman stuff! Eustace! And he would have committed hara-kiri before he would have introduced such a scene into one of his novels. And a rotten psychologist after all."

She felt not the slightest remorse, nor stab of pity. She would have shot him as deliberately if she had guessed who he was.

But something must be done and at once.

She slipped a pillow under his head and went out to the room under the stair where the telephone was concealed. She took down the receiver, but stood in doubt. He must have a doctor—but whom? Her grandmother's old physician had retired. She literally did not know the name of a doctor in New Jersey. Eustace had one in New York, for he suffered at times from dyspepsia. But here—what on earth should she do? She must consult Topper.

She was starting for the wing, when she turned suddenly and ran back to the cupboard.

Elsie! Of course!

It was five minutes before she could rouse Central, who had probably eaten too many chocolates and fallen asleep. Three more before anyone in the house on States

Avenue could be awakened. But finally a man's voice demanded drowsily:

"Well, what is it, this time of night?"

Gita nearly dropped the receiver. "Dr. Pelham? It can't be you! Is it you?"

The voice sprang to life. "Is that you, Gi—Mrs. Bylant?"

"Yes. Come quickly. Don't ask any questions. Bring Elsie. Bring—other things."

The voice became cool and alert. "We'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

Gita replaced the receiver on its hook. "What luck! What luck!" But she was trembling once more.

She knew nothing of first aid and she felt she never wanted to look at Eustace again. She hoped she hadn't killed him, as she had no desire to be a murderess, even in self-defense. But the violence of that embrace and those kisses had turned her heart into granite. She could feel its weight.

And then she was aware of a certain grim humor in the situation. Her would-be defiler was her legal husband!

She walked up and down the hall until she heard a car racing up the avenue. She unbarred and unlocked the door. As she opened it Dr. Pelham and Elsie sprang out of the car and ran up the steps.

"I've shot Eustace," she announced briefly. "Thought he was a burglar. He's in the library."

Dr. Pelham, bag in hand, went swiftly down the hall without a look at Gita. He was a surgeon on his way to a serious case, nothing more.

Elsie grasped Gita's hand and stared at her. Her face was white and quivering.

"I did," said Gita defiantly. "Couldn't see who it was

in the dark. Didn't expect him till Friday." Never would she breathe a word of that horrible scene to anyone.

Hand in hand the girls walked reluctantly to the library. Dr. Pelham had cut out the arm of Bylant's coat and shirt and was packing the wound with sterilized gauze.

"Is he dead?" gasped Elsie.

"No. Wounded in the shoulder, luckily. Is there a strong man about the place? We must get him upstairs to his room. Elsie, telephone for a nurse."

CHAPTER XIV

Eustace had been carried upstairs. The nurse had arrived. Dr. Pelham was extracting the bullet on a hastily devised operating-table. The two girls sat before the fire Topper had made in the library, silent, after Elsie had explained that her brother had driven down to Atlantic City the day before on his monthly week-end visit.

It was evident that Gita intended to make no confidences, and Elsie could only guess what had happened. She herself had almost fainted when she saw Eustace lying there, helpless, unconscious, looking as if every drop of blood in his body had run out. She wondered impotently at the perversity of Fate. For the first time she admitted to herself that she loved him. Loyalty to Gita and to herself had kept that knowledge safely locked in a remote inner cell of her brain. . . . She believed that if he had never met Gita Carteret she could have won him. He had admired her and sought her out whenever they had happened to meet. When he had visited Atlantic City he had called on her. She had given up too easily, but at that time she had been infatuated with Gita and felt a white passion of desire to serve her and help her to happiness: after the girl's long wretched experience. She had cheerfully sacrificed herself, had, indeed, not given her own claims a thought. No doubt there had been also a desire to serve him. And for this! She knew from Gita's cold disdainful face that he had played his last desperate card and lost.

She asked abruptly: "Will you tell me why you are wearing that gown—powdered your hair?"

Gita jumped as if Elsie had flung something at her more solid than words. "Good heavens! I had forgotten all about it." The color flooded her face and she turned her head aside. "I had a fancy—a notion—— If you don't mind I think I'll not explain."

Elsie made no reply and called on her imagination. But well as she believed she knew Gita she could think of nothing that may have possessed her to dress up as her great-great-grandmother with herself as sole audience. Merely a whim, no doubt. Heaven knew she was full of whims.

Gita, pale once more, turned and looked at her. "You are very angry with me," she said. "Wouldn't you have shot a man yourself if you'd found him prowling about your house at midnight in pitch-dark?"

"I don't see how you could have helped knowing it was Eustace. Surely he must have spoken."

"Well, I didn't and he didn't, and that's all there is to it." Her eyes hardened. "You look at me as if you hated me."

Elsie shrugged her shoulders. "Eustace is a great man, and if he dies American literature will be the poorer."

"He may be a great writer, but he is not a great man. Some difference. I don't know that I'd even call him a great writer. That helpless adjective has been so bandied about it's a wonder there's any meaning left in it. He's brilliant, distinguished, subtle, penetrating, and a stylist, but no writer of fiction can be great without drama, and he has no sense of drama at all. There's not a great moment in one of his books——"

"Oh, for God's sake don't dissect the poor man's books when he may be lying dead upstairs!" And then she

added irresistibly: "*We* think him great, and perhaps are better able to judge."

Gita laughed. "I know you think you are! Sophisticated Reputation Factory. Quite a going concern. Still —not for a moment am I assuming that Eustace Bylant couldn't have got on by himself. He has indisputable talent and intellect. But not genius."

"He's a great psychologist."

Gita's lips twisted. "His psychology has a few holes in it. I'm not as incapable of judging as you think. And at least I think for myself."

This unseemly quarrel was interrupted by the entrance of Dr. Pelham. Elsie sprang to her feet.

"Is he——"

"All right for the present. But his shoulder is badly shattered. I've given him an opiate and he'll sleep for several hours. I'll be over in the morning and bring a second nurse."

Gita had risen also. "Come over to the dining-room," she said. "I've told Topper to make coffee and sandwiches."

Then she saw that he was staring at her—that dress—her powdered hair—why on earth hadn't she had her wits about her and changed before they came? "You'll excuse me," she muttered. "I'm terribly bowled over. Topper will look after you — I can't thank you enough——" And she fairly ran out of the room and up the stair. They heard a door slam.

"What does it all mean?" asked Pelham. It was the first time he had thought of anything but his patient's welfare, and he turned to Elsie with a puzzled frown, speculation dawning in his eyes.

"Can't you guess?" asked his sister shortly. "Well,

if you can't I'll not tell you. If you don't want that coffee, let's go home."

"But surely you'll stay—with her?"

"No, I'll not. I'm not sure I'll ever enter this house again. Please come. I'll make coffee for you at home."

"Very well. Certainly."

And with his brows still drawn and his mind racing he followed his sister out of the house.

CHAPTER XV

Gita blinked at the sunlight in astonishment. She had believed she was in for another wakeful night; and she remembered nothing but tearing off her clothes and flinging herself into bed—not caring if she never brushed her teeth again, nor washed her face. She must have fallen asleep at once!

She preferred not to think at present, and there was safety in routine. She put on her dressing-gown and went down the hall to one of the two bathrooms the manor house boasted. Very ugly and unluxurious bathrooms, installed in the nineteenth century. After a cold shower her brain felt disconcertingly clear, but she hummed a tune and rubbed herself into a glow.

As she left the bathroom she met the nurse in the hall.

"How is the patient?" she asked politely.

"His shoulder is very painful. I've just telephoned to Dr. Pelham, asking if I shall give him another opiate—— I couldn't take the responsibility of letting you see him," she added hastily.

"Oh, of course not. What time do you expect Dr. Pelham?"

"He'll come at once."

Gita nodded and went into her bedroom and dressed slowly.

She was aware that she had slept off her cold fury, and felt something like sympathy for Eustace, disabled, and

suffering, no doubt, as much in mind as in body. . . . Probably a man did have a grain of excuse when he loved a woman and despaired of winning her with charm and good manners. Lost his head, poor wretch . . . brain hopelessly confused by fumes of passion and all that . . . tumbled out of hard-won psychological differentiations straight into generalities. Passion must awaken passion; all that old tosh. . . . He must feel like a fool—worse than failure, for Eustace Bylant. . . . She did feel sorry for him, for she had admired him prodigiously, and loved him in a way.

She was devoutly thankful she hadn't killed him. He'd live to write more books—perhaps better ones. Might get some drama into them after that seismic upheaval inside him that must have astonished him as much as herself. . . . Might even marry again, although he'd done well enough as a bachelor. She doubted if he cared deeply about domestic routine. He'd had his grand passion—like Lee Clavering over that strange Countess Zattiany she'd heard so much about. Doubtful if Clavering would have written a really great play if Zattiany hadn't shocked him out of his pleasant pastures into a tropical jungle. He might be dour to look at and none too expansive socially, but it was evident his imagination worked at white heat, and no doubt he was grateful whether he admitted it or not. Eustace would live to be grateful to *her*.

At all events one thing hadn't happened. She remembered that sometime last night she had experienced a fleeting fear that that horrible episode would destroy all she had learned—recall all she had banished—during this past auriferous year, and she would be as hard and hating and handicapped as when she had just escaped from her old life . . . destroy all power of appreciation and en-

joyment, all her new adaptability, all interest in the future.

But all experience counted, apparently. She would always think of last night with a shudder, but at least it had not revived her old abhorrence of men because one man had mauled her—as other men had tried to, sometimes had done, in the past. A second neurosis might be worse than the first. No doubt her sense of justice, of proportion, developing unconsciously, had balanced her unalterably.

She put on a dark blue skirt and sweater, automatically rejecting the bright colors she preferred, and even powdered her face to subdue her own color. Noblesse oblige! And if she didn't feel hard she certainly felt severely practical as she went down to meet Dr. Pelham. Romance had toppled over the horizon.

He looked at her keenly as he entered and asked professionally: "I hope you got a little sleep?"

"Disgraceful, but I did. Reaction, no doubt. Where's Elsie?"

He answered evasively. "She's rather tired. No doubt she'll be over later."

"She's angry with me because she thinks I shot Eustace on purpose. I never knew Elsie to be unreasonable before."

"Oh—I'm sure she can't think that! But she's very sensitive under that calm exterior, and she had a bad shock last night. I suppose you haven't seen my patient?"

"Nurse said I couldn't."

"She must get some sleep as the other nurse can't be here before night. Perhaps you'll sit with him for a few hours?"

Gita turned pale, but answered steadily: "Certainly,

if you think he can stand having me near him. He probably knows it was I who shot him—might feel a trifle nervous."

Dr. Pelham smiled for the first time. "I'll put him to sleep again." And he nodded and ran up the stair.

Gita wandered about the garden until he came down, but she thought neither of him nor of Eustace, but of Elsie. She must win her back. Life would be unendurable without Elsie. Of course she was in love with Eustace. Well, here was her chance. She could stay here, and read to him when he was better, correct his proofs, take his dictation if he felt inspired to write a story. . . . Ideal marriage. . . . Why had he been so blind?

"Idiots, all of us." And she sighed.

Dr. Pelham emerged from the house and joined her. She wished she were actress enough to feign wifely anxiety.

"How is he?" she asked, and knew that her tones were flat.

"Well enough, so far. There's always danger of infection, in spite of every precaution. I shall watch him, of course."

"You'll stay on, then?"

"Certainly. He's my patient, to say nothing of old friendship. I have a vacation due me, and I'll take it now."

They were both as emotional as the garden slugs, regarding each other as if their slender past were obliterated.

"Tell Elsie to come along and not be a fool," she said. "She'd be a brute to leave me alone. I don't want to sit there all by myself, eaten up with remorse, and if you've put him to sleep we can talk."

His eyes, which had been almost blank, became keen once more. He opened his mouth as if to ask an irresistible question, then turned on his heel and was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

When Eustace had arrived with his luggage on the day after the wedding, Gita, anxious to make every amend for her thoughtlessness, had given him the state bedroom, Mrs. Carteret's. One of the baths had been installed in the dressing-room and he had that side of the house to himself.

Although she had entered this room many times since her grandmother's death she had always avoided glancing at the bed, fearing her lively imagination would project a vision of the old lady, high on her pillows.

She stood for a moment beside the bed after she had dismissed the nurse, wondering if she would always see Eustace there in the future. What a contrast! Her grandmother had looked a hundred. Eustace, the blood drained out of his face, narrowing his contours, looked years younger than his age. Almost a youth, in spite of his beard. Pathetic. No doubt, if she loved him she would be yearning over him with those maternal sensations authors of fiction were always reminding the reader —who should know the lesson by heart—surged up in every woman as soon as she fell in love. Well, she didn't feel maternal a bit, but she certainly felt sorry for him. Elsie could do the maternalizing. Why didn't she come?

But Elsie had telephoned to Polly, who was with her at that moment.

"I didn't want Geoff to marry you," she was saying. "I don't mind telling you that. But Gita shan't have him. I'd rather see him dead."

"Gita?" Polly, who was sitting on the desk in the study swinging her feet, thrilled by the tragic tale of which Elsie had given her a bare hint on the telephone, almost fell off. She had responded to the urgent summons because she knew that Geoffrey was in Atlantic City, but although she had listened agape to the recital, she had merely assumed that Elsie was giving her an inside seat; certainly her due. "I don't understand."

"Oh, she's in love with him and he with her. I've known it for some time."

"Then mother was right," muttered Polly, and although she rarely risked cutting lines on her lovely forehead, she frowned until her eyebrows met. "But it's hard to believe it."

"She's only recently waked up to the fact—I can't say just when—I've felt it in the air. He's been interested from the first; that's the reason he stayed away from her in town. I've seen a good deal of him this last winter—stayed with him, you remember. I soon discovered she was haunting him; and something must have happened the night of your mother's party, for I took lunch with him next day and he was as nervous as a cat and wouldn't let me mention Gita's name——"

"I know!" And Polly repeated the shrewd observations of her mother.

"There you are! I don't propose to have my brother's life ruined. I don't know what Eustace will do after this. I should think he'd never want to see her again, but possibly he may be more infatuated with her than ever, go on trying to win her. Fiction-writers are the complete morons where their own love-affairs are concerned. But he *might* consent to divorce her, and then Geoffrey would see no further reason for standing aside. That is if he could still love a woman who tried to murder her

husband—but when men are mad about a woman's black eyes——"

"But you surely don't think Gita knew it was Eustace?" The digression was unpalatable.

"Yes, I do. She might have run up for her pistol, thinking it was a burglar, but he must have spoken——"

"Not if he went there with the purpose you think—might have thought it the wisest policy to—— I can't quite work it out. Didn't she give you a hint of how it all happened? Are you sure she ever believed it was a burglar? May there not have been an interview in which Eustace lost his head—and the pistol went off accidentally?"

"I'd think that a plausible explanation if it were not that the shooting took place downstairs in the library, and she's not the sort to carry a pistol round, even at night—she hadn't gone to bed, either. No, she heard him in the library, went up and got her pistol, then guessed who it was, saw her chance, and shot him."

But Polly shook her always reasonable head. "Gita is no double-dyed movie villainess. I believe her story—and I'm rather surprised at you." She looked at Elsie sharply, and guessed her secret. "It's not like you, you know."

Elsie sighed, and ran her fingers through her hair as if its light weight on her head were intolerable. "I don't enjoy being hard and suspicious, but I feel as if I never could forgive her—and I simply can't go there at present. But you must. Gita shan't have Geoffrey! Everything she wants! It would be a little too much!"

Polly stepped down to the floor. "I'll go. And if it's war to the knife, all right. Gita'll not get him, not while I'm on the job." Her eyes were almost black and her

pretty coral mouth was a straight line with sharp corner-depressions. "Trust me."

"Geoffrey isn't the man to think about the wife of his friend, lying helpless," Elsie reminded her insistently. "He'll turn to you with relief. That's your chance. Take it. He must believe—half believe—that Gita did it intentionally; and he is—ought to be—the sort of man to be revolted. I wish human nature were more of a chart!"

Gita, hearing the door open softly, turned expectantly and was amazed to see Polly instead of Elsie. She drew her over into a corner of the room and Polly whispered:

"Elsie telephoned and of course I came at once. Have sent for my trunks and I'll stay till he's well. She's got to a place in her new novel where she doesn't dare drop it (Polly concocted this hastily), but she knows you'll understand, and will be over before long."

"Oh? That's the first clumsy lie I ever heard you get off. It's plain Elsie still thinks I tried to kill Eustace."

"What if she does? What does it matter? She'll get over it—ought to be rather grateful to you—have my suspicions——"

"Yes, it was plain enough last night. Poor Elsie! Well, I'll give her every chance. But I can't think why she doubts my word." And her lip, for the first time since she was a child, quivered.

Polly, whose affection was not even threatened, for she guessed shrewdly that Gita's pride and almost fanatical sense of honor would prompt her to avoid Geoffrey Pelham and give herself a clear field, patted her hand. "Cheer up. I'll make her see daylight as soon as she gets over this attack of temperament. That's what it amounts to. She's every bit as fond of you as I am."

CHAPTER XVII

Friendship between men may survive rivalry in love. Men have stood shoulder to shoulder through the centuries in the hard business of life, and the need of a strong abiding affection for one of their own understanding sex, is rooted in the depths of being and not to be lightly surrendered. There are instances where the woman has been sacrificed.

But there is always something artificial in the friendship of women. It is a harness lightly worn and has a faint suggestion of carnival about it. Flowers must bedeck the harness, flowers of propinquity, common interests, ambitions, tastes, mutualities of all kinds in their particular sphere. Above all, a dissimilar taste in men. Nature designed them for one purpose only, to carry on the race and guard it in childhood, and if Mind today laughs at her ingenuous plan, she has her subtle revenges. When the flowers wither the harness falls off.

Elsie realized this with a sigh. She knew that she had a certain nobility of character and lofty ideals, and had believed they would survive any test. But they seemed to have staggered under the first hard blow, and cowered aside before a healthy desire for vengeance.

Gita had nearly killed the man she loved and she should not have her almost equally beloved brother. She told herself she had idealized that girl; blinded by her novelty and personality; and now for the first time saw her for what she was. Her instinct of self-protection was strong and if she were to retain her self-respect she must not

hate but despise Gita. Better to acknowledge herself a poor judge of character (when glamoured) than admit she was incapable of true friendship.

Moreover, knowing the latent fierceness and ruthlessness in Gita's nature, she felt she was quite honest in her belief that the shooting had been deliberate; moreover, that if Gita had never met Geoffrey it would not have happened. . . . Sooner or later some man was bound to have demolished that dyke that circumstance had built between conscious intelligence and sex, and an unkind Fate had decreed it should be Geoffrey.

Fine wife for an ambitious hard-working surgeon, always on the lookout for some new kink in the human anatomy he could discover and call by his name. When a woman like that woke up she'd whirl to the other extreme. Have lovers. Snap her fingers at the world. Ruin her husband's life and career. She'd ruined one man. Quite enough. Even if Eustace accepted his release and came to herself on the rebound—but she was in no mood to indulge in day-dreams. Happiness was not in the air!

In the course of a week what Polly called her attack of temperament wore itself out, and she conceded unwillingly that she might possibly have been unjust. Might have developed an unsuspected capacity for exaggeration. Her brain had felt as if a hot wind were blowing through it. When it whispered itself off, particularly after her brother had given her a bromide and she had enjoyed one night of unbroken sleep, she blushed a little as she regarded herself in the mirror, and peered at her fine brow anxiously. Horrid to have been a mere female. And Eustace may not have spoken, after all. Hard to tell what a man would or wouldn't do when the throttled beast in him broke loose. She had never seen Gita fright-

ened, but anyone, even an amazon, might be susceptible to fear once in her life.

Then her conscience became active. Love Gita again she never could. That was over. But she could do the decent thing. Moreover, she was curious to see how Polly was conducting her campaign.

She telephoned to the manor and told Topper to inform Mrs. Bylant she would be over at once. She knew that Geoffrey, mortified at her behavior, had told Gita she was in bed with a heavy cold, and at least she would be spared the discomfort of an apology.

But she sighed. She had lost something. She had a curious feeling of emptiness behind that lofty brow. Well, life was life.

CHAPTER XVIII

Gita was sitting on the edge of her bed when Topper brought Elsie's message.

"Tell her to come up—no, show her into the drawing-room."

She had been beating her heels on the floor, frowning at the window. It was open and voices drifted up from the garden. They were Polly's and Geoffrey Pelham's.

It had been a trying week! Another "wooing game." Polly had "wooed" Geoffrey under her very nose. Exercised every blandishment in her repertory. Anxious when her surgeon was anxious. Gay when his brow relaxed. Sweet, womanly, inexhaustibly and multifariously charming. A white vamp!

And Geoffrey almost clung to her.

She ought to hate her but she didn't. Odd, but after all, why should she? Certainly, she couldn't accuse her of treachery; Polly knew nothing of her feeling for Geoffrey. If Mrs. Pleyden had implanted a doubt in her daughter's egotistical bosom, she had been given the opportunity to pluck it out and had succeeded. She had been sincere enough that day. The lid was still on!

And hadn't she conclusively renounced Geoffrey Pelham to Polly that night when she had taken out her soul and skewered it? Why shouldn't someone find happiness in this world if such a thing as happiness really existed?

"Oh, Lord, what a mess!" She sighed. "Eustace

wants me. Elsie wants Eustace. Polly wants Geoffrey. Geoffrey wants me. And I? Nothing apparently. I feel as empty as an old hogshead on a junk-pile."

And in truth she had never, not even in the old days, felt so depressed. This cataclysm had literally left nothing in her life but her manor! Her three friends were lost irretrievably. To resume any sort of relationship with Eustace was unthinkable. Polly would drift away, absorbed in her husband. Elsie had betrayed her.

She felt a deep and harsh resentment toward Elsie. Not for a moment had she believed in the "cold." That Elsie should have doubted her cut her to the quick. . . . For a night, possibly, shocked as she was, and facing for the first time the fact of her love for the man. But she should have come to her senses before this.

Perhaps she had loved Elsie more than any of the three, and the hurt had gone deeper. Well, she loved her no longer. And she indulged in some bitter musings of her own on the friendship of women.

But she felt terribly alone. Stranded. And she had lost that old boyish independence and hostility to her kind which had made loneliness far from insupportable. Well, she must erect another superstructure.

Polly's laugh floated up, sustained, as it were, on the deeper notes of her playmate; now quite relieved of anxiety for his distinguished patient and friend. The tapping of her heels became a rat-tat-tat.

"Come."

Someone had knocked at her door. The day nurse opened it, her face no longer solemn. She was smiling as one who had a pleasant message to deliver. Gita's heart deliquesced.

"Dr. Pelham promised Mr. Bylant he might see you when he waked up; he's so much better," said the nurse.

"He's just had his broth and is looking forward to your visit."

Gita managed to get to her feet and walk steadily over to her dressing-table. She brushed her hair, powdered, and wished that she rouged and used a lip-stick. She lingered over these superfluities of her toilette as long as she dared, with that woman standing behind her. What was she thinking? She had been told the truth, but did she believe it? Why not? She remembered a story she had once read of a woman killing an idolized husband who had returned at night unexpectedly and been mistaken for a burglar.

What did it matter? She rose from her chair and looked at the nurse much as her grandmother may have done when her arrogant instinct of caste was uppermost.

"You may go out into the garden," she said. "And kindly tell Mrs. Brewster, when she arrives, that I'll be down presently."

It is no longer possible for any but the disappearing ladies of the old régime to "sweep by" those they wish to impress or ignore, for the skirt of the period, short hair, and a limp or free swinging carriage, have put an end to such extrinsic aid to importance. But Gita managed to pass those interested eyes with a cold blankness that gave the innocent object of her disdain the feeling she had somehow evaporated, no longer existed. But she was as sensible as most nurses, and quite used to human vagaries.

"You'll not stay too long?" she suggested mildly. "Ten minutes, I should think. He's not very strong yet."

But Gita was crossing the hall, apparently afflicted with deafness.

She hesitated a moment with her hand on the knob

her knees shaking a little. What would be his cue? Well, whatever it was she would take it. Invalids must be humored.

Bylant was propped up in the bed, very pale and thin, but he smiled whimsically and put out his hand. She shook it limply and sank down into a chair by the bed, her gaze wandering to the window.

His voice was as whimsical as his eyes. "You served me right, my dear," he said. "Don't imagine I've held it against you for a moment."

"Of course I didn't know it was you," she muttered.

"Of course not! And I hope you won't hesitate to shoot the next man who breaks into your house. Be sure it will not be I!"

Gita stirred uneasily. But she was relieved that the interview was not to be pitched in the tragic key. Trust Eustace to carry anything off!

"It is I who should ask to be forgiven," he continued. "But I went progressively mad after you left. Do you remember a book I once gave you to read—'The Cave Man Within Us'? Well, the cave man in me got the best of several centuries of superimpositions. I remember Darwin says somewhere that man, even in the best of our poor civilizations, is so close to the incalculable æons of savagery behind us, the wonder is the veneer remains on him at all. But I promise you that my veneer shan't rub off again."

"Your psychology failed you," said Gita dryly.

"It did!" he said smiling. "It did!"

She thrust out her foot and gazed at the toe of her shoe. She reminded herself she must not excite him but she would have liked a "show-down" then and there.

She glanced up. He was looking at her pleadingly.

"You haven't said you forgive me."

"Oh, yes, of course I forgive you. Forget it and get well."

She rose but he put out his hand and detained her. "I'd like you to stay."

"The nurse only gave me ten minutes."

"Damn the nurse."

"And Elsie telephoned she was coming. She must be downstairs now. It's the first time. She thinks I shot you on purpose. Elsie is a very loyal friend of yours—more than she is of mine!"

"Is she?" His voice was indifferent.

"I'll ask her to read to you as soon as you are better."

"I detest being read to. It makes me nervous."

"Well, tell you all the news, then. You know you'll be glad to see her——"

"I want to see you. You'll come in every day?" His eyes were entreating but his face was composed. Not likely he would make a fool of himself twice.

"Oh—of course—as often as you like. I owe you that much." And she smiled ruefully. But she gave a deep inner sigh of relief as the nurse opened the door with a sprightly:

"Time's up, Mrs. Bylant."

"Mrs. Bylant!"

CHAPTER XIX

She found Elsie at the window of the drawing-room watching her brother and Polly Pleyden, who were retreating down a path.

"Hullo, Elsie. Hope your cold's better."

Elsie turned swiftly and was annoyed to feel her face flushing. "I'm afraid you think me a brute," she stammered.

"Not at all," said Gita briskly. "A cold must be a beastly affliction. Mother used to have them and always went to bed. Eustace had a horrid one last winter. Looked horrid, too. Have a cigarette?"

"No, thanks—bad for a cold." Elsie could not feign hoarseness, but she was grateful that her face was peaked and pale.

Gita's eyes were hard and bright. She sat in a high-backed wing-chair, her head very erect. Her resemblance to the portrait of her grandmother behind her smote Elsie; and with a faint sense of amusement but more of regret, she seated herself opposite.

"Geoffrey tells me that Eustace is getting on splendidly," she said. "I'm so glad to hear it."

"Your brother is an admirable surgeon. Lucky for Eustace he was in Atlantic City that night. Lucky more ways than one. Averted a scandal, no doubt. I've just seen Eustace, and now that he's so much better I hope you'll give him some of your time. He always enjoyed talking to you."

"Of course I will! As often as he can stand me. But I suppose he'll be up and about before long."

"He'll still need amusing. You wouldn't like to move over again? Eustace will probably go abroad later, but not for quite a while, I should think. He'll no doubt prefer to get his strength back here in the country. I'll be glad to have you come."

Elsie darted a swift glance at the haughty, almost arrogant figure in the stately chair. What scheme lay behind that careless invitation that was more like a command? She fancied she could guess.

"I'll come, of course, if you want me. And I'm glad Polly was able to be with you this week. She's not wasting her time, by the way." Elsie craned her neck toward the garden. "You remember I once told you she had—oddly enough—taken a tremendous fancy to my brother. I'm wondering if it's really serious."

But Gita would not discuss Polly with Elsie. And she suddenly remembered that Geoffrey's sister had expressed intense disapproval of such a marriage. She ranged herself on Polly's side instinctively.

Dr. Pelham appeared at the window. "Why are you sitting in the house on a day like this?" he asked. "Come out into the garden. How did you find Eustace, Mrs. Bylant?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me Mrs. Bylant. I'm Gita Carteret to everyone else. He seems all right, and not a bit tired when I left him. Where's Polly?"

"Just left. Her mother's car came for her some time ago as she's expected for lunch. She asked me to explain, as she thought you were still upstairs with Eustace."

Gita placed her hands on the low sill of the window and swung herself out on to the grass. "Coming, Elsie?"

She suppressed an impulse to say "Mrs. Brewster." "Or will you go over and get your things?"

Elsie hesitated. For the first time the eyes of the two girls met in hostility. No invitation for luncheon came from Gita although it could not be far from one o'clock. Elsie was only half-beaten, however.

"I'll telephone for a taxi, if I may," she said. "I don't feel up to a long walk, and I'd be likely to catch more cold in a trolley."

She strolled with them in the garden until the taxi arrived, praying it would be late and Gita, in common decency, be compelled to ask her to remain for luncheon, when Topper announced it. She guessed that Polly would return at the earliest possible moment, but there was something about Gita that filled her with misgivings. Even her hair looked wicked. It almost stood up straight. Two hours, at least!

But the taxi arrived in less than fifteen minutes. The absence of traffic laws in Atlantic City—or of enforcement—was conducive to promptness. She offered to drive her brother home. He preferred a walk later. There was no doubt about *his* invitation! Elsie went off in her dingy cab alone.

CHAPTER XX

If one were to tabulate truisms no doubt the prickly wall, towering to the ether, that surrounds the ego, no matter how close its human relationships, would be first on the list. Polly had made up her mind to marry Geoffrey Pelham and felt no misgivings, for life had given her confidence in herself and her power to charm. For five years men had admired, loved, pursued her, and when she wanted a thing it was hers; why not? Nor was there a rival in the field. If Geoffrey had been captivated by Gita for a time it was quite patent he had given her up as a bad job. Who wouldn't? Both her mother and Elsie had made a mistake. She hadn't been asleep this last week, she had kept a sharp eye on Gita, missing no change of expression nor inflection. Gita had prowled about the house for the most part, looking sullen and anxious. Pelham might have been an automaton for all the effect he had on her. Gita was not in love with him, probably never would be in love with any man, unless remorse drove her back to Eustace; who would be a greater fool than she took him to be if he didn't make the most of his helpless dependence and the great wrong she had done him. And Geoffrey was as indifferent to Gita as she to him. Whether he had discovered he was in love with one Mary Endicott Pleyden she was not yet sure; but that he lingered longer and longer at the manor after his visits to Eustace were concluded, and that he sought her as a matter of course, and looked care-free and often exhilarated in her society,

was as plain as the nose on her face. And they would be together in intimate association for weeks. Her brow was smooth, the corners of her mouth curled upward.

Gita had given Geoffrey to Polly with a grand gesture, convinced on her part that she alone was the obstacle to the happiness of her friend. In her brief interviews with her wounded husband's surgeon the conversation had been strictly technical. Nor had his cool impersonal gaze wavered for a second, nor followed her. It was more likely to follow the enchanting Miss Pleyden. He had come to his senses. Odd if he hadn't.

But they knew even less of what was going on in Geoffrey's mind than they did of each other. Nor had he the remotest idea of what either of them was up to. If he had guessed that they were calmly, more or less, arranging his destiny for him he would have resented it for a moment and then laughed.

That Gita loved him, however collaterally, he had never had the happiness to suspect; although he had known that night as they sat opposite in the dim drawing-room, disguised as their more picturesque ancestors, he would have attempted to win her if she had been free—yes, won, in the end, for he had felt that curious vibration between them. And even after that amazing assertion of hers at the Pleydens' he refused to believe that Polly's regard for him was anything but bright friendship spiced with coquetry. He had immense confidence in himself as a surgeon, but had given too little time or thought to women for the fostering of conceit. He was quite unlike the vapid men of her circle—he had heard or read somewhere that all society men were vapid—and he amused this brilliant rather metallic little butterfly for the moment.

She certainly amused him, let him down, sent him

back to his work refreshed; and during this last week she had been as spring-water in a thirsty desert. That Polly was too proud to reveal a glimpse of her deeper feelings, or even to betray sentiment until he gave her her cue, was the last thing that would have occurred to him. Love alone would have shattered his obtuseness and his love-stream was flowing turbulently in another direction.

After that first meeting in his mother's house he had found himself thinking of Gita at the most unexpected and inopportune moments. She projected herself abruptly upon his mental retina when he was sterilizing his instruments preparatory to an operation, discussing a case gravely with his chief, taking his brisk morning walk, relaxing his mind at the play, trying to fall asleep. He had been profoundly annoyed, but attributed the phenomenon to her unusual appearance. Those fierce black eyes and extraordinary eyelashes, that spirited head that looked as if it were about to lift her shoulders and fly upward, would probably haunt any man. No doubt she had a personality as remarkable, although she had said nothing he could remember, merely asked a good many questions. But what it might be did not interest him in the least. He would not care if he never met her again. His mind that night had been like an inadvertently exposed plate and the impression it had received would fade in due course.

When her unexpected invitation to the Christmas party arrived he had accepted it in the hope that a second meeting would lay the ghost. But when he had entered that great hall lit with pine torches, flaring down on men and women in white wigs and bygone costumes, as gorgeous a scene as even that old manor house, famed for its hospitality in the days of Colonial governors, had

ever witnessed, two centuries seemed to drop out of life; and as he stood in the shadow, watching the mock-stately evolutions of the minuet, a fine haze like a golden cobweb stole over his brain, and he had a quiet conviction he had been there before and was here again for some more definite purpose. Earlier, he had half laughed, half frowned at his reflection in the mirror; but even then it had seemed to him his transformation was so complete as to create a doubt if he would be able to shake off this new personality on the morrow. He certainly would never cease to wonder that for one night in his life he had been handsome.

The romp that finished the minuet had brought him out of his hallucination and he had moved forward merely to find his hostess and do his first duty as a guest. After that he would look on for a while, enjoying the beauty of the pageant, and then slip out. There was no place in such a scene for him.

When he had stood staring for a moment at Gita, hardly knowing what banalities he might be uttering, again with that iridescent cobweb flung over his brain and that curious beating of old memories beneath, his impulse was to flee incontinently. But after a dance with Miss Pleyden, during which he believed that ridiculous illusions had fled forever, he had deliberately sought Gita in the drawing-room, determined to have done with nonsense forthwith.

He was a practical man in a practical age, a surgeon with a brilliant future, a man who wanted no woman in his life to distract him, certainly not the wife of Eustace Bylant. A surgeon, of all men, should find nothing romantic in the most resplendent of women. He had cut too many of them up. They were all made precisely alike inside and if they varied in texture of skin

and in feature, inches and symmetry, the best of them could be classified into types and their original purpose hadn't deviated by a hair's breadth. To idealize them was as nonsensical as to idealize passion and call it spiritual love. Even what personality they might possess was due to the balance of hormones in their ductless glands. Anything further was the result of imitation and artifice. Women somewhere in the dawn of time had concocted a set of tricks and some were more skillful in the use of them than others, some had a more arresting beauty, some a more powerful magnetism (super-active generative hormones), but not one of them, unless possessed of interesting abnormalities, would cut up differently from the other. They were the vehicles of the race, nothing more. Cut out the sexual organs of the most beautiful woman in the world and she would wither like a rose broken on its stem. Take them out in childhood and she would be a neuter and semi-imbecile or worse. There would be no more "soul" in her, no more ego, nor personality, than in a cadaver on the operating-table. Sterilize the Graafian follicles with the X-ray, coincidentally stimulating and proliferating the interstitial cells, and a faded woman's beauty would not only be restored but more likely than not she would possess a magnetism lacking when the function was divided. Perhaps develop a higher "spirituality," soaring mute aspirations: sublimation of the sex-urge.

His scientific mind restored to its balance, he walked into the drawing-room where Gita sat with the candle-light playing on her white wig and golden gown, flickering in the depths of her black eyes, and, without more ado, fell incurably and uncompromisingly in love.

Afterward he wondered how he had managed to confine himself to an oblique declaration, refrained from

pouring his passion over her in a flood. But he had clung tenaciously to the thought of Eustace Bylant, even when she casually announced that she was entering upon a travesty of marriage. That had filled him with exultation but left him as little at liberty to speak.

At the altar he renounced her, although he felt as if the world were sinking under him and left him forever suspended in space. But he looked forward to the sanity of the morrow, to daylight, to the unpicturesque garb of his matter-of-fact era. Thankfully he remembered he was to operate on a woman for cancer at ten o'clock.

He managed to shut Gita out of his thoughts for a week, and then welcomed her back. And he thought of her not only as a woman but as a case. He understood that case thoroughly. He also knew its cure, but he was helpless even if she loved him and she did not; although he never doubted he could win her if it were not for the malignancy of Fate. If her husband were any man but his best friend!—but like all men's men of breeding he had a high and inexorable code.

His outbreak at Mrs. Pleyden's had been irresistible. Well, let her know it. Why not? He was entitled to that much. And he approached her on the night of her party no more than courtesy demanded, and devoted himself to Polly, who always diverted him.

He had asked no questions of Elsie that night he had been summoned to the manor to save Bylant's life, but he had thought of little else, arriving at conclusions not far from the truth. Whether she had recognized Bylant or believed him to be a felonious intruder, she had defended not her house from outrage but her body; that body a peculiar neurosis had made more sacred than virtue itself. He fancied he could reconstruct the scene! Eustace had been a brute and a fool and got his just

deserts. As a man he might sympathize with him but as a scientist he felt only arrogant contempt.

By this time he knew Gita's history. What either she or Polly had not confided in moments of expansion, Elsie's keen analytical mind had divined, and she had found both pleasure and profit in discussing the girl with her brother. Pelham felt an immense pity, and if a surgical operation would have cured her he would have contributed his services as impersonally as when he cut a neat incision and extracted a poisonous appendix. But the knife must come out of the blue. It must find its own way—down through the stagnant waters, and release the sap underneath.

He might have been the man to watch it fall if he had not been compelled to walk down that staircase beside her holding the candelabra over her head and feeling as if he were sinking under the weight of the stone in his breast. If the time were two centuries earlier he would have snatched her from Eustace at the foot of the stair and dashed off with her into the darkness. But illusions had fled. That golden haze had gone whence it came. Men had become mere travesties of themselves.

Although his imagination had shown unexpected activities he indulged in no longings to mount with Gita into the empyrean and dwell with her in spiritual contact. He was a man and he wanted her, comprehensively, exclusively. And he wanted her because he loved her; he was suffering from no mere gust of passion. His scientific balance might be restored, he might converse with himself as reasonably about the fatal similarities and prosaic purpose of woman, but he had never denied (being by no means lacking in observation) that men, at times, were intensely personal in their selection; and whether this were due to a sudden alliance between the

generative cells and the unconscious, or eugenic suggestion, or fetishes, or propinquity, or a pretty face, or a restless longing for completion, or whatever, the fact remained that man, sometime during his life, unless thymo-centric, wanted one woman in particular and moved heaven and earth to get her. Well, he had come to that pass, and by what special set of phenomena induced was a matter of no interest to him. He wished that codes had never been invented. Certainly that he had met Gita Carteret before he had known Eustace Bylant.

He had suffered torments enough during that winter in New York. Gita and Eustace in that narrow house! Companions, friends, almost intimates. How could the man fail to win her? He began with everything in his favor, and if a man could not convert a friend into a lover when he lived under the same roof with her he must be a poor apology for one. And Geoffrey had the highest admiration for Eustace Bylant.

He had sometimes gone out at night and stood in front of that narrow house, paralyzed in a sort of nightmare; then fleeing like a man possessed. Once he collided with a policeman and had some trouble explaining himself, for the hour was two and he guessed that his eyes were as wild as his thoughts.

But on the night after he extracted the bullet from Bylant's body he knew that one phase of his torments had been a waste of nerve-energy. Gita could not have been more cruelly indifferent if she had wounded a criminal just out of Sing Sing. And he had received a subtle message from that golden gown and powdered hair. That she had been indulging in an orgy of intimate psychology, his future as well as her own disposed of in rough outline, he was mercifully ignorant, but that the masquerade was in some way connected with himself and

the night they had hovered on the verge of an understanding, he knew as well as if she had told him.

But on this he dared not dwell. She was still Bylant's wife, and Bylant was his patient. He devoted his skill to saving the man's life, avoided Gita, and turned to Polly for distraction. And for all he knew Gita might really be consumed with remorse; or if undergoing a profound revulsion of feeling, needed only that first interview with her prostrate husband to melt into pity and the determination to atone with a lifetime of friendly devotion. Not love. If that had been latent it would have sprung to life in the moment she had turned on the light and seen him wounded and unconscious at her feet. But there was small consolation in the thought that even if Eustace, pursuing his new advantage, called in the services of an endocrinologist, it would avail him nothing unless Gita loved him. And Gita was by no means the type of woman to translate pity into love. But she might immolate herself, nevertheless.

He had walked with Polly during that interview, hardly knowing whether his answers to her lively sallies were rational or mere sputterings from an overcharged brain. She had told him finally he was absent-minded and run off to her car.

And when he looked in through the window and saw Gita sitting in that high-backed chair like an image of arrogant fate he knew that Eustace had lost again.

CHAPTER XXI

Topper announced luncheon. It was served in the dining-room, as Gita had taken a dislike to the breakfast-room, so intimately associated with Eustace and Elsie; and although she had sat beside Eustace here on the night of the wedding, their chairs tied together with a white ribbon, and listened to speeches and toasts, the only memory that emerged definitely was the white flounces De Witt Turner had sewed on her dignified ancestor's uniform of state. He had looked excruciatingly funny and she had fastened her mind on those flounces and refrained from gritting her teeth when toasting bores were congratulating Eustace and assuming she was congratulating herself.

Geoffrey Pelham had sat on her side of the table and she had not seen him again until he bade her good-night. Then she had been too excited over her beautiful wedding-presents to give him a parting glance.

The dining-room was high and dark and austere. Black-browed Carterets in tarnished frames seemed to look out of the wall itself. But she felt a Carteret among them, severed the more completely from that brief period when all but the blessed sophisticates had called her Mrs. Bylant.

Places for two were laid at one end of the long table. Topper had suggested a small table in front of the fireplace for herself and Polly, but Gita was in no mood for compromise. She would sit where her grandmother had sat alone for so many years, save on the rare occasions

when she had summoned the county to a formal and depressing function. Otherwise, no doubt, she had sat with her thoughts for company, her dimming vision peopling the long lines of chairs with ghosts. No compromise for her.

Topper, too, was uncompromising. If he could not have a symmetrical small table he would not crowd his beloved silver at one end leaving a long expanse desolate. Candelabra and massive pieces were arranged with precision from end to end, and although he felt no inclination to set places for absent guests, and left all but two of the paneled chairs against the paneled walls, the remote curve patronized by this incomprehensible mistress had never the unseemly effect of being cluttered.

Pelham felt that he had enough to endure without being asked to eat in a tomb. His mother talked sometimes of the past glories of her family, whose ancestral mansion (wooden, painted white, with green blinds) had been in Massachusetts, but he was thankful he was descended from the Dedhams on the petticoat side and had been brought up in a light and airy house in Atlantic City, however unhistoried and architecturally debased.

And Gita, sitting in her grandmother's high-backed wing-chair, looked less like a descendant than an ancestress. She had been brittle but vivacious during that half-hour in the garden, but here she looked as if the mantle of these infernal frowning Carterets had frozen the blood in her veins. For the moment she once more interested him as a case.

He mentioned Eustace for the first time since he had made his perfunctory inquiry, after her visit. "I was very much worried for a time—afraid of infection. But Eustace has the constitution of an ox."

"Your good doctoring." And her smile was grimly gracious.

"Surgeons and nurses can do so much and no more. He may thank his sturdy Dutch ancestors and the healthy life he has led."

Silence.

"I am afraid that shoulder will be permanently stiff," he went on impatiently. "Hard on a writer."

"He can dictate, I suppose."

"He once told me he couldn't endure the idea of anyone in the room with him when he wrote. Jealous, or something of the sort. Wanted to be alone with his characters. Authors are afflicted with temperament, you know."

"He could tap it out with one hand. I've noticed one generally manages to do what one has to do. If not one way then another."

"True. I'm glad he'd just finished his novel. By the time he is ready to begin another——"

"It would be a good idea for him to travel for a time. You might suggest it. He's been talking of a trip to South America. How soon will he be able to travel?"

"Not for two or three months yet. Shock must be taken into consideration. . . . South America. Good idea. Interesting country. You would enjoy the trip yourself."

He kept his eyes on his plate, although the excellent fried chicken of the excellent cook might have been a rump steak.

"I have no intention of going to South America. I expect to live in this house for the rest of my life."

"Oh—rather a monotonous life, that, for a girl of your age. And rather rash to be so certain of anything, isn't it?"

"Nothing rash about me," muttered Gita. "When I make up my mind to do a thing I do it."

Pelham cast out another line, thankful for the discretion of Topper who remained in the room as little as possible. "I can't imagine Eustace shut up in an old manor house in winter. New York owns him, body and soul."

"There will be nothing to keep him out of New York. He's welcome to stay here as long as he's an invalid, but when he goes it will be with the understanding he's seen the last of the manor."

A brief silence and then Geoffrey stammered: "Do you intend to divorce him?"

"How could I? What excuse?" And then she burst into a peal of laughter. The one plea she could advance was a husband's wild attempt to enforce his rights.

Her mantle fell from her. "Don't ask me what I was laughing at! Poor Eustace! If he chooses to divorce me he can do so on the ground of desertion. We could meet in Paris. And of course he will want his freedom in time."

The precipitations of the past week had suddenly resolved themselves an hour since into a half-conscious determination to show Polly her place and Pelham that he was still hopelessly in her toils. But when she found herself alone with him in the dining-room she had anathematized herself as a fool and retreated in stiff panic from the results of any such exercise of power. Now she suddenly felt light-hearted once more. Her intense self-consciousness had fled with her gale of mirth. Blessed be humor.

No reason they shouldn't be friends until he went out of her life altogether. And she realized sharply that her most crying want this past week had been someone

to talk to, a confidant. She had got used to talking things out.

She, too, threw out a line.

"Too bad Polly had to desert you today. I'm a poor substitute. Don't know exactly how or what I've been feeling this last week. Remorse, I think, for not feeling remorse. Been as glum as—can't think of anything emphatic enough. Felt, rather, as if I'd been stirred up with a spoon and nothing would settle. Better not try to diagnose me," she added hastily. His gaze was very intense. "Are you and Polly engaged?" She shot out the question and then dropped her eyes in consternation. She had had no intention of being direct.

"Certainly not. Neither I nor Polly has ever thought of such a thing."

"You're as blind as a bat!" She fastened her eyes on him with her fiercest expression and he felt as if they had pushed him to the wall and pinned him there. "Of course she expects you to marry her," she said with harsh and bitter emphasis. "So does everybody else. You'd be a cad if you didn't——"

Pelham gave a violent exclamation and sprang to his feet, overturning his chair. "How dare you use such a word to me!" he shouted, his face blazing. "After what I've been through—done—renounced! You little tiger-cat! I wish to God you were a man!"

He felt no love for her at that moment. He almost hated her. He had had words both high and hot with men who disagreed with him, been abused by unreasonable patients, but it was the first time the most contemptible word in the language had been hurled at him, and the indignity stung him to fury. "Yes, by God! I wish you were a man. I'd beat you black and blue and rub your nose in the dirt."

Gita had gazed at him fascinated for a moment and then dropped her eyes. A curious thrill rippled over her nerves, and she hid her hands under the table.

"I'll take it back," she said hastily. "You know how carelessly and exaggeratedly we use words these days. I only meant that any girl would expect a proposal—after such devotion——"

"Devotion! She knows I enjoy her society. She knows I've never given anything further a thought—any more than she has herself. There's never been a glance of sentiment between us. She amuses herself with one man after another. She told me so herself. What—how could you—after what I told you——"

"Yes, yes, I remember." She did not raise her eyes. Geoffrey had not looked so attractive in costume as with those flaming furious blue eyes—almost black with temper—exactly like an indignant schoolboy unjustly accused of raiding an orchard. "Please sit down. I've apologized. You should forgive me."

He lifted his chair and dropped into it. "You don't deserve to be forgiven," he growled, although his anger was ebbing. "But we'll settle this once for all. If I've made Polly conspicuous there is but one thing for me to do. I'll place Eustace in the hands of a local practitioner and return to New York. As she will spend the summer here we shall drift apart naturally, and anyone who has gossiped—if anyone has—will forget it. There are too many to take my place. But as a matter of fact I don't believe anyone has thought of such a thing but you."

"Oh—I don't think you should do that—leave Eustace—I——"

She felt unaccountably nervous. Cold. There was a slight tremor in her knees.

She was on the point of telling him that Mrs. Pleyden and Elsie had expressed themselves forcibly, and that Polly was serious . . . that would settle it. But she could not—or would not. Moreover Topper entered at the moment. Gone was the desire to show Polly her place, but Polly had had her chance and lost out. Why should she sacrifice herself further? . . . Sacrifice? She frowned down at the unsteady hands in her lap. What did she feel, anyhow? Damn it.

Then that zealous little censor she had firmly dethroned reinstated itself slyly. Why, of course, she wanted his friendship. She must have a friend. She'd not make a second mistake and marry one—not she—a man whose eyes burned like blue rockets . . . rather interesting, a friendship with a spice of danger in it. Her friendship with Eustace had certainly lacked that. He'd never hung out a danger-signal until that night after the party when his eyes betrayed that the bottom was beginning to fall out of his little game. And in him it was merely revolting. The very thought made her sick.

But it attracted her uncannily in this man, in spite of the fact that she had nothing to give him. Well, she'd have him for a friend if she could manage him. Heaven knew she needed one. Being a hermit in an old manor house didn't really appeal to her at all. No drama in that. . . . Here might be the bridge to something new. Element of suspense in it, anyhow. . . . Who knew? What, after all, was life but successive links in a chain?

Topper had brought in a lemon pie as light as a soufflé and retired. She looked up and smiled, a hesitating, curiously girlish smile. Geoffrey's face was calmer but his eyes still burned.

"You won't really go?" she asked pleadingly. "You

know how Eustace depends on you. It might set him back. And now that you're no longer worried about him you're enjoying your vacation. If it's all right about Polly there's no need to bother. And nobody else will be here but your sister. Mrs. Pleyden thinks Eustace wrenched his shoulder and has only telephoned once to inquire. Topper and the gardener won't talk. Nor those nurses, I suppose. The other servants think he slipped and fell downstairs. And I don't want a strange doctor here. And as Elsie's coming to stay, no doubt Polly will go home. Do, please, stay."

There was no coquetry in her manner, but he looked at her probingly. There was a new intonation in her voice and her face had softened curiously. She looked not unlike a coaxing child . . . not quite. But his mind felt a little dazed. She had been so many different kinds of female since he had seen her, less than an hour ago, sitting under that portrait of her grandmother. . . . But he was not too bemused to ask pointedly:

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Yes, I do. You see—I haven't a friend left. I'll never even like Eustace again. Polly may not be in love with you but she takes no interest in me or any woman when she is concentrating on a man. I've barely seen her except at table since she came here, and then she's almost as silent as myself. I'll never forgive Elsie. Perhaps you've guessed she cares a lot for Eustace?"

"Yes, I think it possible."

"He should have married her—no doubt will in time. I've asked her to stay here and give him a chance to find out his mistake. But she failed me when I needed her most—I've been like a lost soul this last week and would have given everything I possessed for one good long talk with her. So, you see——" And her eyes so re-

cently fierce, wicked, arrogant, looked as if pleading to heaven, and she smiled tremulously.

He turned pale and gave the table a sharp rap with his fork. The lemon pie was neglected. "You place me in a beastly position," he said harshly. "You are asking for friendship, and—well, Eustace is upstairs, wounded——"

She lifted her head, looking less like a madonna than a Carteret. "This is my house and he is my very unwilling guest—unwilling on both sides."

"He is still your husband."

"He never was my husband." She saw where this digression was leading and added hastily: "Not that I want to hear about anything else. I—well, I suppose it doesn't matter if I say it—I suppose I should have loved you if I could love anyone. But I can't. That's final. Your sister and Polly say I'm asexual."

Dr. Pelham swore fluently and shamelessly.

"But it's true——"

"That subject—and all it connotes—may not come within the province of surgery, but I happen to have a friend who is a distinguished endocrinologist and psychiatrist, two sciences which are more dependent on each other than is generally known. We have discussed the subject until I know as much about it as he does; and it happens to interest me profoundly. You are no more asexual——"

"I am. I want to be. I don't wish to talk about it. But if you don't want to be my friend——"

"I'll be your friend—God knows I never wanted to help anyone more—until you and Eustace have put an end to your marriage farce. Then, by God—oh!"

Polly's laugh rang through the hall.

Gita sprang to her feet. "Go out. Don't let her come

in here. Tell her I've had to go to the kitchen——"

He followed her precipitate retreat and caught her by the arm. "You must——"

She was cowering away from him. "Let go! Let go!" she said through her teeth. "I hate being touched." And she pressed her hand against her chin.

He dropped his hand but his eyes flashed. "I'd not do anything you disliked—thought you disliked—for the world. But tell me when I may have a talk with you again. How can we be friends if I never see you alone? Polly and Elsie both here—there's Elsie's voice—have you ever been on the salt marshes at night?"

"No." Her eyes sparkled. "I've always wanted to."

"I'll meet you at the manor gates at ten o'clock to-night and take you for a row. Don't fail to be there——"

The door opened and Polly entered followed by Elsie.

CHAPTER XXII

Gita scowled. Geoffrey ran his hand through his hair until it stood up like a rooster's comb. Polly's eyes glittered. Elsie set her lips.

Gita turned on her heel. "Topper gave us your favorite lemon pie, Elsie," she said over her shoulder. "I'm going to tell Amanda to make another for dinner." And she marched off.

"I must go and take a look at Eustace." Geoffrey made his exit.

Polly turned to her ally. "What's happened?" Her eyes were more frightened than angry. "They looked as if he had just kissed her."

"That's nonsense, of course. You forget the circumstances——" Elsie's eyes turned to the head of the table. "But something's happened. That lemon pie hasn't been touched. And it's Amanda's chef-d'œuvre and the favorite dessert of both of them."

"Do you suppose he told her—told her—oh, it can't be possible he still cares! Oh, no! I suppose she'd intrigue and fascinate any man if she took the trouble, and it looks as if she had. She told me once she was as vain as a peacock, and she's become so used to admiration—no doubt she's been missing it——" She grasped Elsie's arm. "Tell Eustace not to let her go!" she cried, her voice harsh with fear. "Make him believe he's only to hold on, has everything on his side—I forgot! You want him yourself. I'm out in the cold!"

Elsie was still frowning at the lemon pie. "All that's in the future," she said. "May never come to anything. But if I could keep him buoyed up until Geoffrey had no excuse to stay longer——" And then she shook herself angrily and drew her hand across her brow. "No, I'll not do anything sly and detestable. It's not a pleasant sensation to despise yourself. We have to live with ourselves—must keep on good terms. You're quite equal to managing your own affairs and you're on the ground. You can see to it they're never alone."

Dr. Pelham was heard running lightly down the stair. The two girls went hastily out into the hall.

"Well, I'm off," he said. "Eustace won't need me again today."

Polly moved toward him. "I was going to take you for a drive to Cape May this afternoon——"

"Oh! I'm sorry. I promised I'd meet a colleague in the Traymore Book Store at three and take him for a tramp. He's only able to get down to Atlantic City for the day. I'll be over in the morning. Go up and sit with Eustace for a few moments, Elsie. He'll be glad to see you."

He smiled and nodded to Polly, and a moment later he was striding down the avenue. He had driven his car from New York but rarely used it.

Gita entered through a door at the end of the hall.

"Amanda has two more lemon pies," she said encouragingly. "Intact. She made apple dumplings for the kitchen table. Bring your things over, Elsie?"

"Topper took them up to my room. Geoff just gave me permission to sit with Eustace for a few minutes."

"Splendid. Go right up."

She took one look at Polly and then made for the stair herself. "I'm going to lie down," she announced

in a high clear voice. "Awfully tired. Don't sleep well. Amuse yourself, Polly."

"Gita!"

Gita paused on the landing and clutched the banister. A show-down? Well—surely Polly must see there was no excuse for her to stay longer. "Yes?"

"Oh, nothing." Polly swung on her heel. An explosion, and she would have to go. She had no intention of going.

Gita ran up to her room and locked herself in. She had never felt less tired. Nor did she want to think. She could always lose herself in a good novel, and she had a new one.

But half an hour later she slipped out of the house and tramped until it was time to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE dinner was almost gay. Each had her part to play and each was too clever to play it self-consciously. By common consent both Bylant and Pelham were ignored, and they talked of the past winter in New York, the summer distractions planned in Chelsea (in which Elsie promised Polly to take part if only for the sake of copy), and the new spring novels. The last subject afforded an opportunity to quarrel, which gave them a welcome release.

"I feel like a movie," announced Polly, as they left the dining-room. "Come along, girls. We can all crowd into my car."

"I can't go, of course." Gita bit her lip. "Must do the decent thing. What time do you suppose you'll be back?"

"Round ten, probably."

"I don't think you should drive on lonely roads at night."

"Nothing very lonely between here and Atlantic City, after we get out of that avenue of yours. But if you don't want to stay alone—there's always mah-jongg——"

"I detest mah-jongg. Run along. I'll be all right."

She shrugged her shoulders as the two girls ran upstairs to put on their things. She could hear the car, anyway. Easy enough to hide behind those thickly planted trees in the avenue.

"I'll stop at the house and ask Geoff to go with us," said Elsie, as the young gardener brought Polly's road-

ster to the door. "Then he can take us to one of the hotels for supper. Polly says she feels like making a night of it."

"Good idea," said Gita coolly, and wondered what excuse Pelham would make.

She tapped softly on the door of the sick-room. The nurse whispered that her patient was sleeping soundly, for the first time without an opiate.

That duty done she sat down firmly with her novel; but after she had read one page four times wondered why anybody wasted time on fiction, and flung the really notable effort into a corner.

She resolved not to think and promptly began thinking.

Fine performance for her—sneaking out at night to meet a man and indulge in a semi-romantic episode on the salt marshes. They'd probably freeze. Better wear her fur coat. Look like a bear on its hind legs.

Not in the least did she feel like one of those old Gita Carterets. If they'd ever outraged their sense of decorum by doing such a thing and risked a cold in the head—thank heaven she never had colds—hoped Dr. Pelham wouldn't sneeze—they'd have done it as a tribute to capitalized Romance . . . sake of one more enchanting memory . . . look back upon when suckling their first baby.

Doubted if they ever felt really romantic. Not enough imagination, probably. Merely sentimental.

Well, she didn't feel romantic either. No ultimates to look forward to, no romance.

What on earth had possessed him to suggest such a thing? She could have got rid of Polly somehow and found plenty of opportunities to talk with him in the house or garden. Not because he wanted to make love to her—moonlight—solitude—night—all the rest of it.

Including squawking ducks for chorus. Or was this the duck season? Or did they have wild ducks in New Jersey? She'd gone duck-hunting one night in California and it had been great fun although one got rather stiff.

She endeavored to concentrate on California. Gorgeous moonlight nights on the bay. Ferry-boats like fairy ships, glittering in the dark. Chain of lights "across the bay," a necklace for the Queen Calafia Ordoñez de Montalvo had imagined far back in the centuries . . . Bare sharp hills. Fog moving in through the Golden Gate like a ship . . . California faded off the map.

Just an impulse, probably. Felt he had more to say and wanted to get it off his chest. No idea of making love to her; she need have no misgivings. He had a hot temper but a cold code of honor. Nor would he try to approach her obliquely. He had none of the subtlety of Eustace, the diabolic patience, the ability to cloak his desires and play a "wooing" game, while he watched for the right moment to strike. His self-control was of a different sort. Wonderful to break down that self-control, if things were different and she were different. But she had her own code.

Well, if their teeth didn't chatter it would be something to remember when she was old. She really wanted to go more than anything else in the world. Oh, yes, *wanted* to go. Must have her drama—loved beauty, and the night was heavenly, in spite of the cold.

CHAPTER XXIV

She changed into a thick skirt and heavy sweater and discarded the fur coat in favor of a dark warm cape she had bought the year before to wear when she prowled in her woods at night. At five minutes to ten she walked swiftly but alertly down the avenue, feeling less romantic than conspiratorial.

As she approached the gates she saw Geoffrey standing before his car in the full moonlight.

"Be careful," she called out. "Polly and Elsie went to a movie and may be back any minute."

"They won't be home for two hours yet—later probably. Elsie came in to ask me to go with them and I made her promise to say I was out. Then Polly came in and called up two of her admirers and they were all to meet on the Boardwalk—go to supper after the movie. Getting into the house without running into them may be the problem——"

"I left the library window open."

She stole a glance at him as he sat beside her in the car. The set grimness had returned to his face and his eyes looked more gray than blue. No doubt he regretted proposing anything so ridiculous; also, his conscience hurt him, probably. Wonder he hadn't telephoned off.

They reached the edge of the broadest expanse of the salt-water marsh lands. It was as cold and desolate as the moon that silvered it, and looked as remote from

Atlantic City, blaring and flashing a few miles away, as if it had swung off into space.

Geoffrey removed his ulster and locked it with his cap in the car. He wore a white woolen sweater and an old pair of corduroy breeches.

"I used to know these meadows like a map," he said, as he rowed with sure strokes through one of the winding narrow channels. "I'd come here to think out my problems, and generally at night."

Gita drew her cape about her and looked out over the marsh, sniffing the salt air. A sensation of peace descended upon her. She loved color and movement and brilliance, but she also loved cold austere beauty, low tones, hard outlines, white landscapes in winter. This marsh was starkly beautiful. Far in the distance was the black mass of a pine wood. As quiet as death. Only once a train roared over a bridge.

She looked at Pelham. He was smiling; his face was as boyish as when he had flown into a temper, but charmingly pleasant. "I shouldn't have asked you to come," he said frankly. "But we're here, and I'll leave remorse for tomorrow. You may tell Eustace if you like——"

"I certainly shall not. I may fly to the moon with a man if I choose. If he were still in danger I shouldn't have come, of course—you wouldn't have proposed it. But I came out to enjoy myself and I don't intend to split hairs."

"You're rather a pagan, you know."

"Perhaps. Seems to me we're all pagans these days. Except you. *You're* rather old-fashioned."

"I expect to remain so. Nevertheless, I wouldn't be anywhere else. We needn't talk at all, if you'd rather not. It is enough for me——"

"You asked me out to 'have a talk,'" she said mischievously.

"I'm only too ready to listen to anything you may have to tell me."

But Gita had no intention of telling anything. She had once obeyed an egotistical impulse and the present mess was the result.

But something must happen to make the night memorable. No hope of anything fortuitous. Impossible to turn over, and be rescued, in these narrow channels. Not a soul on the meadows but themselves. . . . She wasn't cold, after all—rarely was, for that matter. That fur coat was a wedding-present from Mrs. Pleyden . . . well, let her thoughts scatter.

Their eyes met with that quick spontaneous smile of youth to youth, which may mean all or nothing. If Geoffrey were experiencing the pangs of unsatisfied love it was evident he had no intention of betraying himself. He was a young man indulging in a picturesque hour with a beautiful girl and it was a part of his part to be duly appreciative.

But with that quick involuntary response, that smiling subtly intimate exchange, she felt a curious stir in her body. An invisible cloak seemed to envelop her under that dark ugly cape and turn mere warmth into a glow. A curious sense of unreality. . . . Reality?

"Have we been here before?" she asked abruptly.

"What I felt once or twice when we were in fancy dress? Unfortunately that sort of thing has been scientifically explained. It means nothing I'm afraid."

"I rather like the idea of reincarnation." Quite forgetting she had rejected it with scorn.

"So do I—as a man. But science is uncompromising."

"Science is always finding out its mistakes. Look at

anthropology. I read a lot of that last year." She shied away from any mention of Eustace, even as tutor.

"True. Well, of course, anything is possible. We know very little after all. Certainly nothing of the Beyond."

"I choose to believe," said Gita clearly and looking straight at him, "that two hundred years ago I was living at that manor and you came here from Boston on a visit —political, probably—and brought letters to us. You would, of course . . . I think I knew it that night."

"A very pretty game, if you want to play it." She saw his eyes flash and his mouth set, simultaneously. "But this is not a romantic age, you know. Particularly since the war. I'm told that no old cliché is so heartily despised—that's saying a good deal, isn't it? Clichés being anathema in your set, I'm told."

"That crowd is the merest ripple on the surface. Not hit in the solar plexus by the war like the young English writers, but taking their cue, although they'd hate to admit it. We're all exactly the same as we always have been."

"Fundamentally—I suppose we are. But luckily most of us are forced to live on the surface of our minds, at high pressure, and seldom have time to take a plunge."

"Seldom, yes. But occasionally?"

He made no reply. She laughed at his frowning brows. Once more his eyes were almost black. She forced humor into her own eyes lest he receive a hint of that curious sensation of something rising in her veins. But her laugh was infused with that voluptuous warmth bordering on hysteria by which young girls betray themselves when indulging in prolonged attacks of giggles. "You really believe it, you know. One night after a ball, when our fine clothes were new, you begged me to slip out

and row on these meadows with you, and you had a Spanish cape over your blue satin coat and white——"

"You are rather unfair, you know."

"Not a bit of it." Her voice rose. "We're merely reconstructing the past, not building up any kind of future. No obstacles in those days, although my irate papa probably boxed my ears when I got back and marched you off to the library to ask your intentions——"

"I'd hardly have put him to the trouble!"

Her eyes glowed. "Of course not!" she said softly. "Of course not!"

"Do you love me?" he asked harshly.

She shrank back and pulled the hood of her cape over her face. "You are Geoffrey Dedham asking that, of course."

"I'll be damned if I am. What's come over you? I thought you were above flirting?"

"I am!" Her voice was muffled by more than the hood.

"Put that hood back."

But she covered what was still visible of her face with her hand. "I'm frightened," she whispered. "Terribly frightened."

"I've no intention of touching you. I was a fool or worse to come out here with you, but it will stop at that——"

"I'm not afraid of you. You don't understand, of course."

"Oh, yes, I do!"

"But you can't—you mustn't—— Oh! *What*——" Gita for the first time since she was an angry child burst into strangled weeping. He had been resting on his oars. The boat suddenly shot ahead.

"Cry it out," he said grimly. But his voice ended on an uncontrollable note of triumph.

"I feel so strange," sobbed Gita. "I—I—don't know what to think. I never——"

"No, never! Sap rising."

"What do you mean by that?" She pushed back her hood and tried to stab him with her eyes. But they were full of glittering tears.

"You know quite as well as I do. And as soon as Eustace is well you'll put it up to him squarely."

She flung her head down on her knees, convulsive sobs wrenching her body. "I won't! I won't! I don't want to marry you!"

"Oh, yes, you do. You never really wanted anything before in your life." He rowed toward the shore.

"I'd hate you——"

"You would not!"

"I do hate you——"

"That's all right. Hate me as much as you like. It amounts to the same thing."

She began to tremble violently. "They say—you feel horribly when you come to after drowning," she stammered through her chattering teeth. "I—feel—just like that."

"Of course. You're coming to life."

"It's not a—poetical feeling at all—and I must blow my nose!"

"Do. Have you a handkerchief?"

"Yes, I have." She used it. "I wish I'd really drowned." Her teeth were still chattering.

"It's a submerged—hitherto—part of your ego that hurts as much as anything else. It's undergoing birth-pangs as well as your ill-treated body."

"I hate my body."

"I shouldn't."

"Oh-h-h——" A groan of dismay. "I—I feel deathly sick."

"Lie down flat in the boat."

She obeyed precipitately.

"Oh, I do feel dreadfully," she moaned. "And I've —never—been—ill in my life."

"Don't talk. I'll give you brandy in a moment. I brought it along in case of a chill."

"Don't tell me it's in your hip-pocket!" She gasped. "I couldn't stand that!"

"It's in the pocket of my sweater. You must be feeling better. Here, sit up and drink this."

She raised herself warily on an elbow and drank the brandy he had poured into the silver cup of his flask—a present from a grateful patient.

She fell back again, but only for a moment. A swift wriggling movement and she was sitting erect at her end of the boat.

"More beastly materialism," she muttered. "Why couldn't I have come all right by myself?" She stared at him resentfully, then gave a short laugh like a bark.

"God! How romantic!"

"We don't need romance, my dear."

She sighed, laced her fingers, and stared at the bottom of the boat. Then she looked up at him and smiled. He caught his breath. A wavering dazed smile, that passed from her lips and melted in her eyes.

"It's all over—the resentment," she said shyly. "And I'm glad—very glad——"

"We land in a moment. Can you drive a car?"

"Why—yes. Pretty well. Polly—and—others—have taught me."

"Get into mine. Throw out my ulster and cap. Leave it at the gates. Take yourself off as fast as you can."

"But——"

"Do as I tell you. Leave it in the shade where it won't be noticed. Here we are. Jump out."

CHAPTER XXV

As she parked the car under an oak she heard Polly's swift roadster approaching. She darted into the heavier shade of the avenue, but that figure in its long dark cape looked ominous to two girls alone on a deserted road at night. Polly put on her brakes and brought her car to a protesting halt. She cried out sharply:

"Who's there? I—I've got an automatic."

Gita was in no laughing mood, but she heard herself giggling.

"It's Gita!" exclaimed Elsie. "And that's Geoffrey's car."

"I'm in for it!" She sighed. "And I'd have given my immortal soul to be alone tonight."

She came out into the road. "Yes, it's I. Been taking an airing."

"Where's Geoffrey?" Polly's voice was high.

"Don't know, I'm sure."

"That's his car."

"Is it?"

"You've been out with him. Don't deny it."

Gita drew her hood over her face. "Why should I deny what you've no right to ask?"

"No right!"

"Certainly not. Sorry you caught me. Thought you'd telephoned to two of your heavies and were going to supper."

"Did. But Bob Hillier passed out—how'd you know I telephoned?"

But Gita would not mention Geoffrey's name. She turned and walked swiftly up the avenue.

"Gita Carteret!" Polly's voice tore by her on a wild shrieking note. Elemental Polly, at last! Gita set her lips grimly and sped on. The matter was out of her hands. She would not discuss it. She wanted nothing but to be alone.

"Gita Carteret! You'll pay! You'll pay!"

Menacing, that shriek, no longer hysterical. Gita heard the roar of the engine behind her and moved hastily to the extreme edge of the road, glancing over her shoulder. The headlights swerved and drove toward her. She had no time even to harbor incredulity. Polly intended to ride her down!

She darted toward a space between the trees, through it and into the shrubbery, less terrified than humiliated at being obliged to run instead of standing up to a fair fight. But she could not grapple with a frantic roadster with blinding headlights.

The car plunged through the opening after her. She scrambled to the top of a hedge and swung herself over and fled across the lawn, dropping her hampering cape. The car crashed through the hedge. She waited until it was almost upon her, then jumped to one side. She caught a glimpse of the two girls. Polly's face was a whirling disk of white fire. Elsie had flung herself upon her, trying to wrench her hands from the wheel, but Gita knew that Polly was nearly as strong as herself. Elsie took little interest in sports.

Polly brought the car about with a wide sweep, picked Gita out with the headlights and drove toward her once more. But Gita had got her breath. She dodged behind an oak on the lawn, ran swiftly to the left and entered the avenue again between trees too closely planted to

admit even a roadster. Her one chance was to reach the house before Polly could bring the car about again and aim for the entrance to the avenue. She reached the foot of the steps just as Polly made a last wild attempt to ride her down.

Gita was breathless, but managed to walk up the steps with her head high. Topper had left his usual faint light in the hall. She lit several of the brackets. No more fighting-matches in the dark for her!

The car had come to a standstill and Gita wondered vagrantly why Polly hadn't driven it up the steps and into the hall, in the fashion of their reckless ancestors when urging the more picturesque horse. But she heard nothing for a few moments but the low murmur of voices. Probably Polly had dropped out of her murderous obsession with a hard thud and was properly ashamed. She hoped she'd take herself off, and waited for the welcome sound of the roadster in the avenue. To retreat first would be to show a white feather, and if Polly wanted a scene let her have it. But she was severely shaken. She knew she had had a narrow escape. Once more she sighed. How was she to recapture those last wondrous moments out there on the meadows? Retreat into a throbbing solitude with this miracle that had come to her?

Rapid feet on the steps. They were coming!

Polly entered first. Her face was no longer blazing white. It was flushed, but otherwise composed. Elsie looked distraught, and fell at once into a chair, staring and gasping.

Polly's head was as high as Gita's. Her tones had never been more crisp and metallic. "Well!" she said. "I tried to kill you. No intention of denying it. Almost

wish I had. But once more you've won out. Call the police if you like."

Gita shrugged disdainfully.

There was a sound of flying feet on the stair.

"What is the matter?" demanded the nurse. "How could you make such a terrible noise under Mr. Bylant's window? I only waited to give him an opiate, but he won't calm down until he knows what has happened."

Gita dismissed her with an impatient wave of the hand.

"Miss Pleyden lost control of her car. Nobody is hurt. Please tell him so at once."

The nurse, her curiosity by no means gratified, retired from a promising scene.

Gita turned to Polly.

"I really think there is nothing more to say. Don't you think we'd all better go to bed?"

Polly looked at her wonderingly.

"Don't you realize that I tried to kill you?" she asked.

"Well, what of it? You didn't. Nor do I feel disposed to lay it up against you. No doubt I'd have done the same thing in your place. Succeeded, too. If ever I start out to kill anyone I'll do it. No anticlimaxes for me."

Polly gave a short laugh. "Couldn't have thought of anything more cutting! Can feel the knife down on the bone. Perhaps you are grateful to me. You always wanted drama. You've hit the high spots twice in one week."

"Melodrama," corrected Elizabeth Pelham. "But love and melodrama seem to be synonymous terms—in real life, at all events. We do it better in fiction. First Eustace, then you. And both of you belong to the topmost stratum of civilization!"

"No one is civilized," snapped Polly. "There's not one of us—who's *alive*—who wouldn't kill to get what we wanted, if we dared. Well, I dared, and I'm not feeling ashamed of myself. Not a bit." She turned to Gita. "You said out there I had no 'right.' I have! And you know it! He was mine and you deliberately took him from me."

"He never was yours. Nor had he ever the least idea you cared for him, if that's any consolation."

"What on earth did he think? I've not looked at another man for months."

"Thought you were amusing yourself with a new type. You told him you amused yourself with one man after another."

"Probably did. Sounds like me. Nothing so blind as a man who's in love with another woman. Were you out with him tonight? I've a right to ask that."

"Well, I was."

"Did he make love to you?"

"Of course not! How could you think of such a thing?"

"Don't trust any man. But he's in love with you and you with him. Don't deny it."

Gita gazed over her head.

Polly turned white and beat her hands together.

"And I must take it lying down! I, who vowed I'd get him and let nothing stand in my way. I wish to God I'd killed you!" she burst out passionately, although the words ended on a sob. "I'd gladly have been hanged or electrocuted or whatever they do to you in this state. And now I can't go at it again. I feel as limp as a young corpse inside. Can't even try to scratch your eyes out. Am the well-brought-up Miss Pleyden once more! Well—thank God I was something else for five minutes.

I'll cherish that memory through a long and prosaic life. Poor things, we moderns. Well, I'm off."

She hesitated, then went forward and held out her hand.

"I don't ask you to forgive me; but we may as well be sports."

Gita shook the cold hand. "Good-by, Polly. I'm sorry. Wish it could be wiped out. I'll miss you."

Miss Pleyden shrugged her shoulders. "Chapters have to end sometime. You've made one quite interesting for me! I'll light a cigarette if you don't mind."

She performed this rite, nodded to Gita and Elsie and swung lightly down the hall. A moment later they heard her car traveling at a reasonable pace.

Gita turned to Elsie. "*Vale,* Polly. But you don't go. Not yet. You stay here until Eustace is able to leave. That's final."

"I feel lost and deserted myself!" exclaimed Elsie. "I wish I'd never laid eyes on you. You are a terrible devastating force, Gita. What will you do to my brother!"

And then she stared at Gita's radiant face.

"Oh, don't worry! Don't worry! It won't be as bad as you think."

"Oh, when people are in love!" Elsie's voice was more sarcastic than her mood.

Gita swung on her heel and stared out into the moonlight. "Better go to bed," she said coldly. "Nothing more to say, is there?" . . .

She felt herself moving forward, felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to run out into that moonlight . . . recapture that mood so strangely compounded of exaltation and dismay, triumph and disappointment, poignant sweetness and futile resentment at the remorseless incompleteness of life. . . .

She whirled upon Elsie and, although her words tumbled out fiercely, a curious quaver of helplessness ran through them. "Oh, you both have your revenge! I should think life altogether wonderful tonight and I almost hate it. It was bad enough to have to break off —to miss—to have to wait—oh, damn honor! Damn noblesse oblige! I wish we'd been born in a different class—like some of your sophisticates—that never heard of such things—no, I don't! I only wish things could have been different—that life didn't always laugh at you—that life wasn't always trying to get the best of art and generally succeeding—— Life could be so wonderful and it's just a mean chromo of art and delights in the fact and in taunting our anticipations—those lovely works of art we create and hang in the blessed spaces of the mind—taunting and shattering——

"Oh, stop staring at me as if I were a lunatic, and go to bed. I'll be all right tomorrow. Oh, yes! Oh, yes! I've *got to be*. But at any rate *I* won't go to bed. That would be a little too much!"

And she hurtled past the startled Elsie and into the drawing-room and slammed the door behind her.

THE END

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